柳実冬貴

対魔導学園35試験小隊

AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"

2.魔女争奪戦

ファンタジア文庫

AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon" 対魔導学園 35 試験小隊

Volume – 2 - Witch's Struggle - Scramble for the Hope

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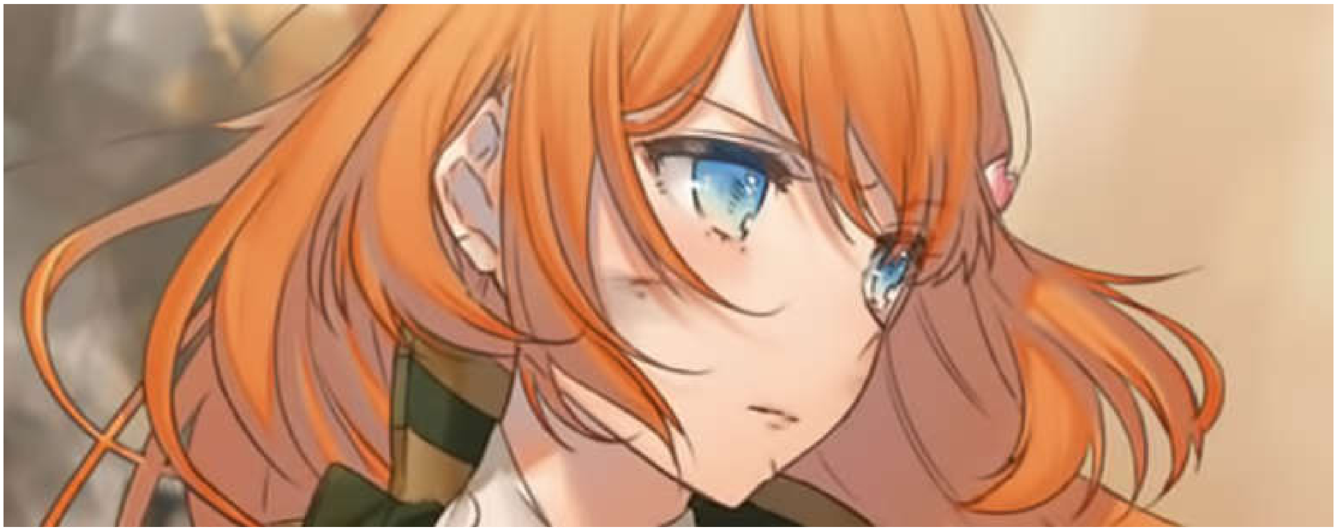

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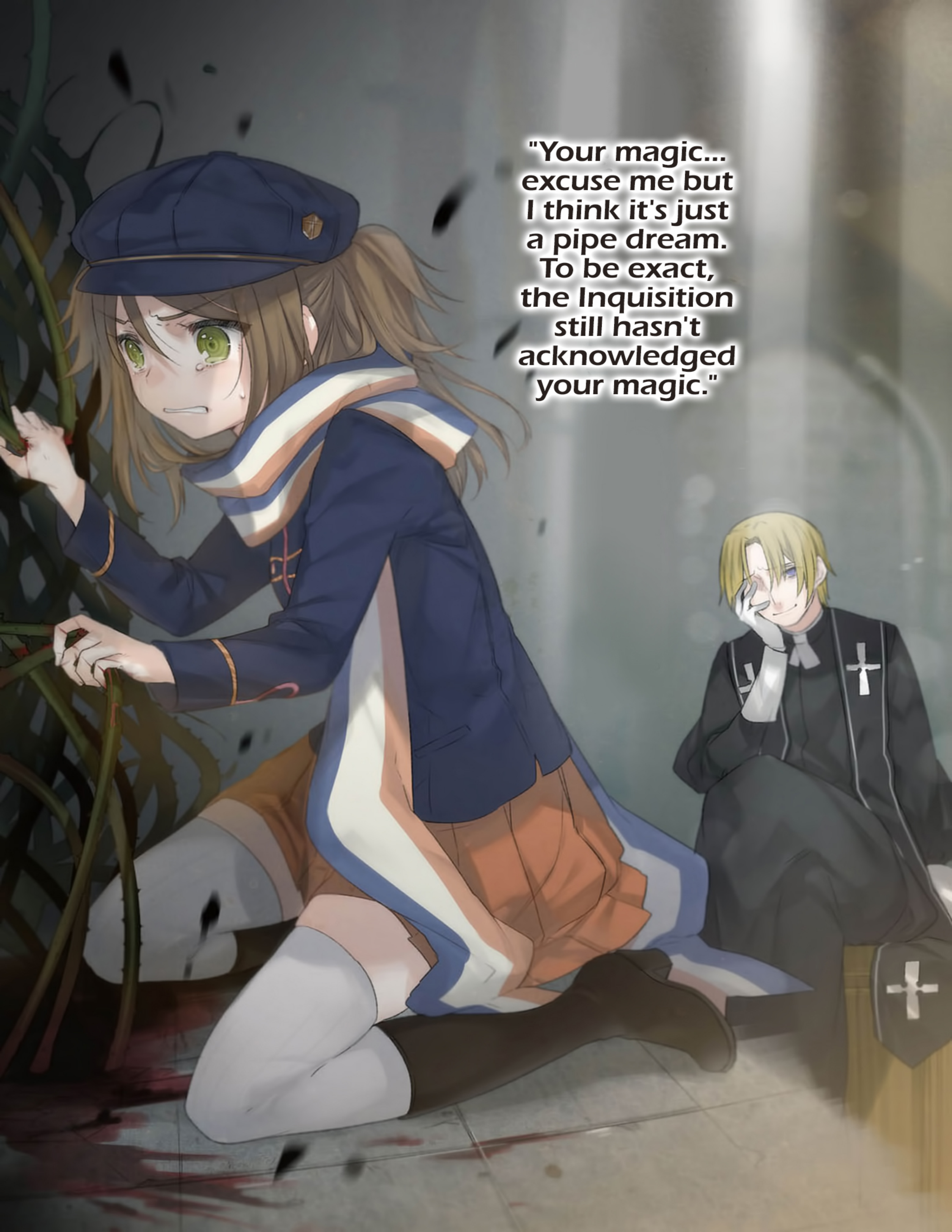
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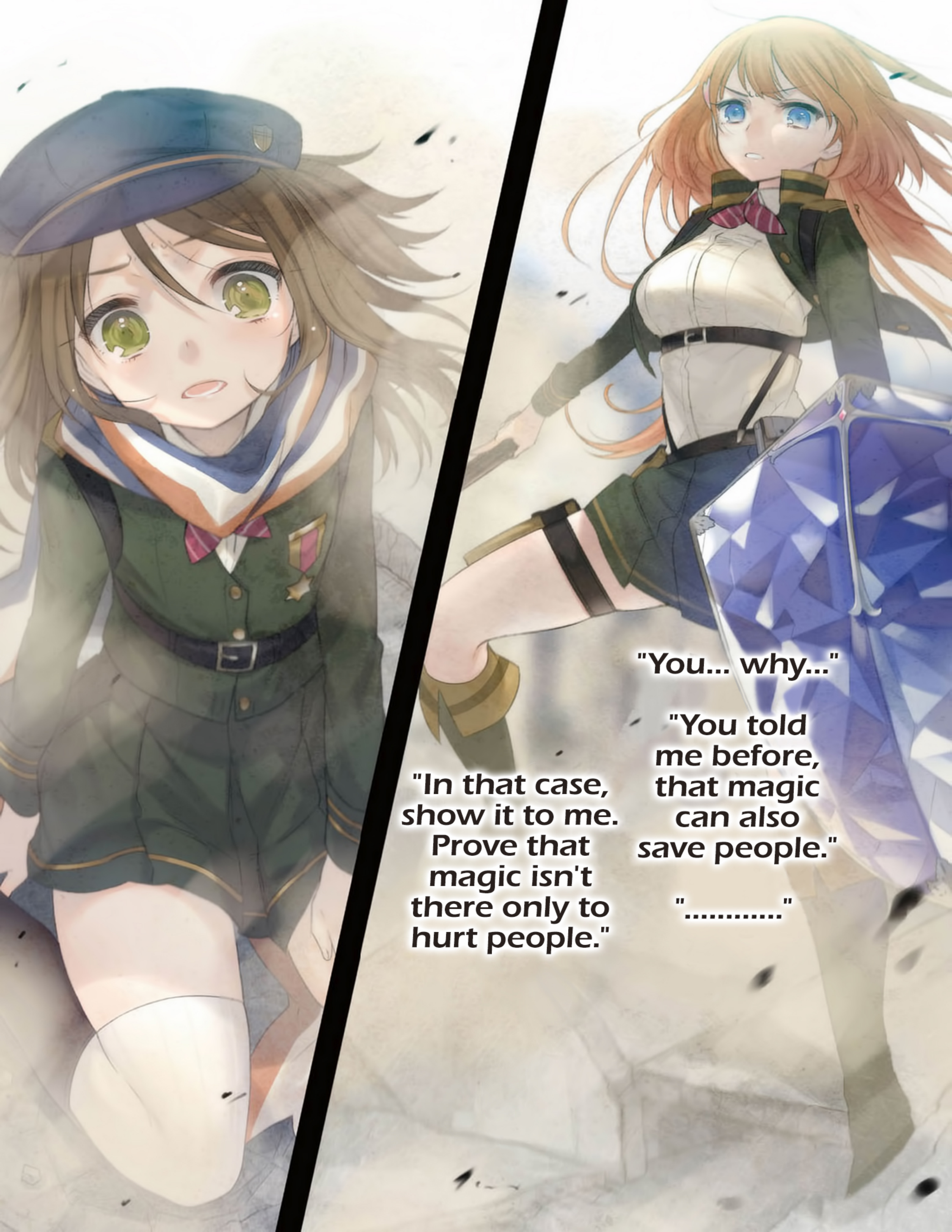

"You... why..."
"You told me before, that magic can also save people."
"..........."
"In that case, show it to me. Prove that magic isn't there only to hurt people."

Prologue

"——I won't forgive you...!"

Nikaido Mari's patience was growing thinner, she snapped and stepped forward with murderous intent.

She was inside a decayed, run-down house on the outskirts. After the battle with witch-hunters, she realized that the priest was lying.

Inside the church, a carefree young man with a book in his hands stood beneath the stained glass.

Haunted the Necromancer. Valhalla’s executive. In addition to being a necromancer, he was an alchemist, a summoner, a former priest of the church, and a sorcerer designated as a S-Rank risk.

"Can't forgive what? Mari-san."

Seeing his eerie smile, Mari's hair ruffled in rage.

Magic power flowing from Mari's body shook candlesticks and chairs around her.

"You didn't keep your word... you lied to me about not involving the civilians, it was one of the conditions for my cooperation."

Haunted closed his book and started walking towards Mari, his hands folded behind him.

Taking eerie steps, chilly like a ghost, he moved closer to her.

"I didn't lie. In this world, there's no such thing as innocent bystanders."

Voicing his ridiculous theory, Haunted made a cheerful smile.

"Also, it would be boring without a big audience right? It was a Hero summoning right? A great man's summoning, right? Even though I invited a guest from the country of Hades, it would be too bland if Inquisition was the only audience. From what I think, you should be praise me lots? It doesn't seem like I'll forget this sweet fragrance for a while."

His body trembled with delight.

While his body was convulsing, he breathed out recalling the screams of the people as the Hero terrorized the city.

A single tear ran down Haunted's cheek.

"...I can't stop remembering it. That manifestation of emotion. That's pure humanity. You think so too, right?! Their shine as they're caught between life and death... a traffic jam's etude is all right as well, but the requiem is the most wonderful after all! And above all——"

Haunted cried out in ecstasy; his figure worth being called a madman's.

Mari's eyes were dyed crimson, her magical power exploded. Candlesticks and chairs flew around, phosphor ran along the walls instantly.

"I wanted to see that look of yours! Aah, I saw something really good! That expression fits you well!"

Before the squirming man, Mari closed her eyes and made her decision.

Believing in this man was a mistake in the first place.

This guy shouldn't live any longer. Everything about him was evil.

She arrived at a single conclusion.

Annihilation. Giving him an ultimate end where not even a single cell remained.

"——Don't fuck with me!"

Suddenly, a magical square appeared in the vicinity of Mari.

The color of Mari's magic was difficult to describe, if one had to say it, it would be like seven colors flowing at once.

Just like an illusion reflected in the north sky.

While seeing an image of the slaughter, she prepared a formula inside her brain, magic overflowed from her body.

In that moment,

Mari fired a beam about two meters thick, attacking Haunted.

The pillar of light like the sun breaking through the clouds in the sky swallowed Haunted.

The church was filled with that pillar of light, which escaped towards the sky.

Mari put a hand on her knee, breathing roughly.

"...shit."

She cursed, after confirming with her eyes that her attack had failed.

The church was partially destroyed and clouds of dust rose up, but standing in the moonlight was Haunted, who was perfectly fine.

While deploying a black barrier around his body, Haunted's mouth distorted as he grinned.

"——Belladonna Garden."

He spoke out a magic name. Immediately afterwards a part of the black shadow changing into thorns jumped at Mari from her feet, wrapping around and restraining her.

A contract summoning magic. An aggregation of magical creatures in the form of swamp thorns that follow it's owner's will and captures his prey. If it was only a single 《Belladonna Garden》, it was not very risky, but a collection of them was a menace. Summoning aggregation of magical organisms required a non-standard witch who possessed a large amount of magic power.

"You shouldn't use offensive magic in a place like this. You're an ancient wizard same as me. You should know that using a magic like that can result in the destruction of the city."

Haunted preached to her while putting his hand on his priestly garb.

"Without saying the magic's name nor chanting, to be able to unleash such destructive power. As expected of the aurora witch."

"…………"

"You're impulsive, but I think that's one of your charms, is it okay? Attacking me, that is. It's a betrayal of the entire Valhalla. Your family that's protected here… the children might not be let off safely okay?"

Protesting against the decision of Haunted, Mari grit her teeth and used her all of her body's remaining strength.

"I like the honest Mari-san. Going out of control occasionally, it's lovely."

"…ngh."

"Let's forget about the attack earlier and go back to the headquarters together."

Bathed in the light coming in through stained glass, Haunted extended his arms to Mari.

The thorns that were holding Mari turned into ash, she dropped down after she was freed and tried to push away Haunted's hands.

But, Haunted's fingertips subtly trembled.

"…my apologies, it seems like we have customers."

He suddenly spoke, as Mari wondered what it was about suddenly the door behind her was opened vigorously.

"It's the Inquisition! Place your hands behind your head!"

She looked back at the two Inquisitors, a man and a woman who were holding rifles.

No, the uniforms were slightly different after a closer inspection. Two people from AntiMagic Academy's test platoon.

Mari sensed a battle. Haunted didn't miss the two people.

"——Run away!"

She tried to kick off the floor, but thorns entangled her leg and she fell in place.

Immediately after. Despair erupted.

...**zukyun*——*

As if suddenly becoming moist, the church's interior was stained black, from the floor through the walls to the ceiling. Thorns flew out all at once. Without hesitation, the thorns assaulted the students.

"Uwaa, what is——Guohh!"

The boy was entangled with thorns and his skin couldn't be seen.

"Noo...what is this..."

The girl was frightened at that sight. She was in front of a variant and she stepped back.

However, before she could take three steps, a shadow caught the girl's foot.

"Kyaaaaaaa!!"

Having her leg stuck, she fell off and was swallowed by the bottomless swamp.

"He-help me—— It hurts...? Noo, something went in! ——It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!! Help me! It hurts, hurts, hurts——nnn——"

Heartbreaking screams were interrupted as the girl was swallowed by the swamp completely.

Mari released her foot and ran over to the restrained boy.

The boy has been already turned into shredded meat by tightening thorns, in order to make him suffer they bit into him slowly.

"Don't move! If you don't move the magic won't work!"

"Re-release me... untie... me..."

"I'll help you! Don't move so I can help you!"

Mari tried to process the thorns, however each one of them was a different individual. Her magic was rejected because she tried to undo them all at once.

"Damn it...! Something... something like this!"

If she cast a spell on the boy by mistake, his body would break because of rejection.

A magic formulated to dissolve magical organisms, when used on humans, they couldn't withstand it.

She pulled the thorns desperately one by one.

"It's useless, the plants of this garden will grow endlessly until their magic power exhausts. Even if I died that is."

Haunted said coldly, he flashed a grin while sitting on top of the altar. The thorns had already tore through the meat and reached the bones.

Even so, Mari continued trying to save the boy. Haunted shook his head and sighed.

"Your magic... excuse me but I think it's just a pipe dream. To be exact, the Inquisition still hasn't acknowledged your magic."

"Shit! Shit, damn it...!"

"So, "Using magic in order to make people happy"... was it? Sorry, but that's impossible."

"Aa....aaaahh."

"——That's *the kind of thing* magic is in the first place."

Immediately after Haunted said that, the boy was torn apart in front of Mari.

Organs and blood splattered, staining Mari. She was stunned and stood motionlessly there.

Seeing the boy's blood that stained her hand, a tear fell from Mari's eyes.

Disappointed, Mari slumped down on her knees.

At the same time, the church's door reopened. A new light aggressively entered.

And directing muzzles inside was more than a single figure.

"I'm the Inquisition's "Dullahan". I'm arresting you for murder, caught red-handed."

"..........."

"Also, you have no rights and you won't get a lawyer. From now on all your human rights are revoked."

Mari looked back at the altar.

Haunted was no longer there.

Mari no longer had any intention or will to resist.

The muzzle was aimed at her head, she was handcuffed and forced to stand.

It's over. She will probably be imprisoned in the innermost prison by Inquisition now.

When she thought that, she felt something from her wallet located in the pocket.

Not an ordinary heat, something based on magic.

"——This is..."

While being handcuffed, Mari was terrified.

——This is bad!

She put a barrier in her head, but was a bit too slow.

Inside her head, there was the sound of something being cut and Mari fell where she stood.

"Hey you! What are you doing! what happened?"

As her consciousness was fading, she heard the Inquisitor’s voice and pounding noises.

Mari, feeling that she was losing her memory, quietly passed out.

Chapter 1 - Amnesiac Witch

In the deepest part of the AntiMagic Academy, forbidden area's innermost prison. The dark side of the school.

Unlike the areas where the innocent witches were living in temporary houses, it was a prison where the worst of criminals were held in.

The facility employed means for negating magic. The ones taken there were those who are guilty of crimes against humanity.

"This place smells as bad as ever, don't you think so too Kurogane-kun…?"

While walking through the dim corridor of innermost prison, AntiMagic Academy's chairman Ootori Sougetsu asked the man walking beside him.

The man was clad in a pitch black uniform adorned with the embroidery of the Inquisition symbolizing the AntiMagic Academy, a magical circle torn up on a cross; a unique emblem. Next to it was drawn a knight with no head, symbolizing the black troops.

Black, AntiMagic Academy's investigator's section 1, city's Zeroth Extermination Riot Police alias ——"EXE". EXE were special forces carrying anti-magical weapons, Relic Eaters.

"I'm used to it."

The man replied indifferently.

His name was Kurogane Hayato and he was the captain of the EXE, meaning he was the most influential person in Dullahan.

Sougetsu cast a skeptical gaze toward Hayato who had an unfriendly attitude, and looked around.

On the corridor’s wall there were multiple clockwork devices imitating coffins, and from the glass windows pale light was leaking in.

"Just like a graveyard. If you have gotten used to this place, I cannot honestly praise you for having such nerves."

"Excuse me. But you were the one who made this facility, Chairman."

"I instructed them to make it, but I didn't tell them to make it so white and creepy."

Sougetsu complained in dissatisfaction as he looked at the coffin.

If you looked inside the coffin from the window, you could see people inside.

The coffin-like devices lined in the innermost prison were called Iron Maidens, cells made in order to seal witches and sorcerers.

In case of high ranking witches, the typical anti-magic materials were insufficient. Because they were difficult to restrain when awake, these devices were made.

The witches sealed inside were in a state of suspended animation unable to even dream.

The suppression collar-type equipment sealing the magical power of the witches had a terrible cost to performance ratio.

That's why there was no other way than to keep the witches asleep with such a powerful force.

"So? How's the girl's state?"

“After the capture she fainted, and it seems like she lost most of her memories."

"Memory loss... how troublesome."

"I'm guessing it was a magical charm that caused a memory loss to prevent information leakage. According to a Seelie's diagnosis her memory should start returning after some time."

"Do you know anything about her identity?"

When asked, Hayato looked towards Sougetsu.

"Her name is Nikaido Mari, an Ancient Wizard, and if I'm not wrong she’s the "Witch of the Aurora", she’s been a wanted witch for the past three years."

"The witch from no-killed cases? Although her standing is subtle, she indeed has the skill. I pulled some information from the brain of a low rank member of Valhalla about it before."

"Yeah. It's about the orphanage from the boundary line, the motive as to why she has been cooperating with Valhalla has already been investigated."

Sougetsu grinned.

"It's disturbing that it was a charm for memory loss and not for suicide bombing, they are trying to conceal something after all... I wonder if they'll attack all at once in order to either kill her or retake her."

"The possibility is roughly 50% for both."

"In that case, before the effects expire we can utilize her."

"...meaning?"

"Lately Valhalla has started quite a few large-scale operations. Like the Hero terrorism last month. People who are a good source of information are quite rare. Whether it's the big-shots or small fries that come to us, either of them are fine."

"...I don't understand. Chairman, what do you mean."

"You don't get it? I'm talking about fishing."

Saying that, Sougetsu imitated the movement of casting a fishing rod.

Hayato narrowed his eyes, understanding the Chairman.

The two were walking for a while until they reached their destination.

At their goal there was an Iron Maiden, it had a different form from the others, rather than pale light coming from the window, there was a red light.

Around the Iron Maiden were Regins with instruments that were used to adjust it.

Raising his hand, Sougetsu told them to move.

"Unlock it, also, remove the chain."

The people in lab coats looked at each other and asked. "Is that okay?"

Sougetsu signaled for them to hurry with his hand, the woman in lab coat put her hand on one of the four levers installed on both sides of the coffin.

A sound fitting of an Iron Maiden was released, and heavy steam was discharged covering the field of view.

The door of the Iron Maiden was opened and the overflowing steam crawled across the ground.

Inside was a young girl.

The girl was constrained with chains, and nearly naked. The two Regin women purged the chains one by one.

The girl was released from all the constraints and slammed into the floor groaning.

That's when the girl opened her eyes. What was reflected in her pupils was impatience and fear.

Not understanding her situation, she was confused.

"Wha, what's this? What happened? Why, why am I naked...? Who are you?!"

Not remembering anything, the girl trembled. She looked at Sougetsu standing in front of her.

Sougetsu was smiling brightly. He covered her with the white lab coat hiding her skin.

And, Sougetsu spoke to the witch who lost her memory, Nikado Mari.

"Heya, welcome to AntiMagic Academy! Nikado Mari-san you have been admitted to our school!"

Mari, not understanding the meaning of those words at all, tilted her neck earnestly.

"Well, umm, there is a relation between the failure of the magic chant and the formula performance, although I told you before there is a deep relation... umm, first, the most important is the operative procedure that effectively converts magical power into a spell, it's a program so to speak..."

The Teacher's voice caused drowsiness. The class for operative procedures science, was always quiet, even the most diligent students were feeling sleepy during this class. However, the situation was different for the last few days.

The classroom was strangely noisy. Besides the Teacher's voice there were whispers resounding all over.

"That rumor, I wonder if it's true?"

"That it was the Small Fry Platoon that defeated the Hero? I don't believe it."

"But that's what the guy who witnessed it said. Still, he has quit the school already. What a coward."

“Look who’s talking, you didn’t even participate in that battle. Spriggans were defeated, I wonder who defeated the Hero."

"Somehow, there's a story of a knight in a purple or a blue armor defeating him."

"Gahaha, isn't that a hallucination caused by fear?"

"That armored knight was somehow very similar to the captain of the Small Fry Platoon."

"Oh, I heard about that as well. Maybe it's some kind of Relic Eater?"

"Then that guy is a Dullahan, right? A Relic Eater possessor?"

"What's that, laughable. I mean that guy, he can't use guns right? Defeating a Hero with a sword sounds ridiculous."

Students gazed at Takeru all at once.

Takeru, whose seat was located in the middle of classroom, shrunk. This was the first time he'd had so much attention focused on him, he honestly didn't feel too good about it. And the majority of the rumors were correct.

At least he wasn't given these kinds of doubtful looks before.

Actually, none at all.

The Chairman pressed him not to leak the fact that he was a Relic Eater contractor outside. Because Takeru was a student as well as a provisional Dullahan. He had to protect the discipline around him.

"In fact, there was a huge change around Kusanagi."

"Indeed, Ootori Ouka following him and... her, right?"

"Right? They definitely are not siblings. Don't look alike at all."

"Even if she were his stepsister, it's a strange story... what a mystery... before you realize, she's already beside Kusanagi."

The students' line of sight moved from Takeru to the seat on his right.

The seat right beside him, even though there should have been a meter's interval between them normally, just that seat was joined together with Takeru's.

It was clearly a weird arrangement. Doubts concerning Takeru weren't the only reason of the stares, his strange neighbor was also the cause of it. Frowning she suddenly pulled his clothes lightly.

It was a quite modest attraction.

“...Onii-chan.”

Onii-chan... she called out to him like that.

Takeru was forced to look at her.

Azure-colored eyes, azure-colored hair. A girl wearing an azure-colored dress was sitting right beside him.

"I have a question, Onii-chan."

Her name was Lapis Lazuli, this month, she'd entered the same class as Takeru as a transfer student.

Her real identity was not that of a human. She had made a contract with Takeru during the Hero attack last month and was one of the Relic Eater series. Her exact name was "The Malleus Maleficarum Type-Twilight "Mistilteinn" ". A powerful Magical Heritage possessing its own will. Although there were Magical Heritages that took human form mentioned in historical records, there were none in modern times so it was treated as something invaluable.

No other details aside from that were known. Even the contractor, Takeru, wasn't told any details from the Chairman, Ootori Sougetsu.

Such a mysterious existence was preying on Takeru.

The problem was, the way Lapis called him "Onii-chan.".

『"Even among the Relic Eaters, Mistilteinn is special and wants to be beside it's contractor at all times."』

『"...haa."』

『"That's why, it will become part of your daily life, I like that girl's human form. So as to avoid confusion among the students, I will put her in your class as a transfer student. Also, I think there's quite a few students who saw your appearance as a "Witch Hunter", so even though I've asked you to keep it confidential, it's just on paper."』

『"Well, I got it."』

『"I also prepared a fake family register for Lapis, it's this. Take a look at it."』

Saying that, Sougetsu passed a piece of paper to Takeru.

Tilting his head in wonder Takeru bent down towards the piece of paper, and looked at the face in the photograph and the name.

Kusanagi Lapis.

『"——HEY."』

『"Hahaha! Sounds bad doesn't it, pardon me."』

『"Wait a moment! No matter how you look at it, something like this won't pass!?"』

『"It would be troubling if you were sticking to each other like superglue right? If you're siblings then it'll be fine. Or maybe you are dissatisfied? You wanted an older sister?"』

『"That's not the problem! Besides, I already have a younger sister!"』

『"Having a little sister is a good thing, I'm jealous."』

『"What the heck are you talking about."』

『"It's already been decided, from now on Lapis will be your little sister in public. Do your best! She's your stepsister so some extreme skinship is acceptable. Grats～ Onii-chan～. HAHAHA you little pervert."』

…………

Grats～ Onii-chan～ my ass!! That rotten Chairman…!

Honestly, this situation where he'd suddenly gained a little sister was horrible. And that rotten Chairman had shrewdly made Lapis call him "Onii-chan".

In the first place, he already had a real little sister. He couldn't meet her easily because of complicated circumstances

Even Ikaruga called him "siscon", because he doted on his sister that much.

Therefore, this expansion caused Takeru a stomach pain.

There was a critical point, if Takeru cancelled the contract, death awaited him.

Meaning, Takeru's lower and upper body which were joined by Lapis' magic power, would revert back to their original condition.

He was in a position where he couldn't go against Lapis and Sougetsu. That was why he answered Lapis, he had to answer. Even if it was the 104th question today.

"…qu-question? What is it?"

"Operative procedures science. Why is it a compulsory subject?"

Don't ask me, is what he wanted to say, but Takeru responded like this.

"Ugh… in order to examine traces of magic during the investigation… that's what they say… what was it… something like a filter? If you look at a crime scene through a machine like that, an investigation team's magic tracing can confirm residual magic? If you use more powerful filters you can understand what magic was used in operative procedure… or something like that."

"I see. Indeed, if you know what kind of operative procedure was used for the magic, it can help you select appropriate anti-magic substances to counter it."

Lapis said that assenting monotonously.

When he was done with the question, he would normally be relieved, but he was not.

Stare——————………

Even after hearing an answer to her question, Lapis did not stop looking at Takeru. Even during class, during meals, she was always staring at him when they were together.

Takeru was really weak when it came to dealing with her.

For example she was gone all of a sudden, but in fact she was still around him, honestly, it was a bit eerie. He was especially bad with her eyes, they were like a deep-sea you could get drawn into.

"...Onii-chan."

"?"

"Why are you making a pained face when you're looking at me?"

"Nope, there's no such a thing?"

"I see. When I called out to you earlier, I could see an increase in your body's temperature and heart rate. If your physical condition is bad, please say so without reserve."

"I'm fine...!"

Stare——————————............

She moved her face closer to his.

The distance between her and Takeru was 10 centimeters. It could only look like a kiss from the side.

"I see. If that's the case... then it's fine."

While saying that she approached even closer.

The distance was 3 centimeters. Takeru's gaze was trapped in Lapis' pupils.

The surrounding students were excitedly looking forward to something.

"I-I re-re-request a seat change please!!"

Suddenly the girl in front of him declared such a thing while standing up.

Semi-long blonde hair and small stature. Her trademark was a headband that made it look like she had rabbit ears.

Saionji Usagi, a member of the Small Fry Platoon, same as Takeru. Usagi and Takeru had been in different classes, however because of the amount of victims and people who had left, a single large class was formed. All members of the 35th platoon belonged to this class.

With Usagi's declaration, the classroom stirred. Usagi who had a terrible stage fright had suddenly requested a meaningless seat change. Normally she would have never, ever done it.

Usagi's face blushed brightly, and begun trembling intensely, her shoulders rose up while she breathed heavily.

The teacher of operative procedures faintly directed his gaze at Usagi's face.

"Hm? Saionji, why a seat change? We are in the middle of the operative procedures lesson right now..."

"Emm, umm, that... Kusanagi Lapis...-san... and Kusanagi are siblings, it's weird for siblings to sit right next to each other."

"? Is it weird?

"R-r-rather than weird——it's unhealthy!"

W-why...?!

The motivation behind the seat change was still unknown, and the classroom was dead silent.

However, despite Takeru asking himself that question, everyone's line of sight was sneakily directed towards him.

"It is unhealthy."

"So it's like that."

"I thought so."

"A siscon."

"I thought that atmosphere was weird."

And so on. For some reason Takeru was showered with contempt.

Why?!

In reaction to everyone's unjust treatment towards him, he almost started crying. The contempt from the girls' group was also painful, and the looks of jealousy from the boys group were dreadful.

After enlisting a perfect superhuman like Ootori Ouka, the presence of Lapis was like salt in their wounds, and fuel for the fire.

However, the seat change was actually a good idea.

Fortunately, the situation became difficult for the teacher and he started considering a seat change.

At this rate, he would be able to escape from this super awkward situ——

"——I don't want to."

Remaining expressionless, Lapis clung to Takeru's arm.

"Unless I'm connected with Onii-chan he won't be able to exist. That means if I'm separated from Onii-chan, Onii-chan will die."

Weird, despite being correct, the nuances were weird.

"Onii-chan belongs to me, and I belong to Onii-chan."

What she said was not wrong.

It was not wrong, however those who were unrelated didn't know that.

"C-connected... it can't be... no..."

"Siblings..."

"In love so much that they'll die if separated..."

"Commit suicide you piece of shit."

"That eroge bastard..."

With those words flying around, Takeru no longer had a choice but to shed tears. Lapis just titled her head curiously, Usagi's face was deep red and her mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

In this airspace, there were no allies for Takeru, just when he had begun to think like that,

"——Teacher."

Behind, there was a sound of someone pulling a chair.

After turning around, there was a girl with sunset-colored hair.

Ootori Ouka stood up.

"I also recommend a seating change."

Her line of sight was directed at Takeru.

She also looked at him with contempt.

"Besides the fact that siblings are sitting next to each other. I think it's strange that their desks are joined together during class. And more than anything, having them in front like this is distracting. At least instruct them to return the interval between the desks to normal."

Unlike Usagi's, this was a decent reason.

However, her eyes were scary. It was close to being murderous intent. This aura was not that of the Small Fry Platoon's Ouka, it was the Dullahan's "Calamity"-san.

Why are you angry at me? Even though you know all the circumstances.

He tried to gesture, but Ouka continued to emit waves of murderous intent while looking towards him and pointing beside him. While her hands were wandering in the air, Takeru's shoulders were dropping.

Looking at his arm, Lapis was still clinging to it.

Tightly clasping both of her arms around his, she stared at him expressionlessly.

Her feelings could not be discerned, it felt as if he was gripped by a doll.

But for some reason her body was awfully warm.

...is this...loneliness...?

He had been separated from the public before, alone, however such ostracism was a first. Beyond expectation, his heart was cold.

40 deaths, 5 people missing, 75 injured, 5 school buildings collapsed, and 27 people voluntarily dropouts.

Above all was the damage the school suffered in the Hero's attack last month. If you considered the scale of the entire city, the casualties were much larger than this.

The incident was massively broadcast on TV, it was the first time in a decade that this much damage had been done. Needless to say that it shocked the public that had been living peacefully.

Because of this, the status of the Inquisition was wavering. The Spriggan security forces had been thinned, there was a lack of crisis control from the upper echelons of the Inquisition, immediately after the incident a lot of problems appeared in various places.

However, the rapid covert operation on media allowed them to hide the number of victims. On the contrary, the fact that it was a Hero summoning previously used in the Witch Hunt War, and that there was only a small amount of damage despite that, was broadcast. A broadcast that admired the Inquisition.

All these things were dealt with unexpectedly quickly.

The classes resumed a week after the attack, platoons were operating normally.

It was now a day after they had returned to school.

"...umm."

After the operative procedures science class had ended, the Small Fry Platoon members hung out at the end of the classroom.

Takeru timidly called out to the other members, a threatening feeling filled the air around them.

Ouka was standing with her back to air conditioner, Usagi turned away with an elbow on the desk.

Ikaruga was grinning while looking at those individuals.

After repelling the hero with their cooperation, he thought they had bonded a bit, but it was already falling apart.

"...I have certainly reluctantly welcomed Ootori Ouka when she enlisted, very reluctantly, as a special case despite being reluctant... But I did not hear about such a bonus coming."

Usagi said that very politely.

"I didn't know that it had a human form as well. I should have asked in advance, I'm going to protest to that idiotic father. Exposing a Relic Eater to the public... Impossible, a violation of the rules."

Ouka also growled while wrinkling her eyebrows.

Ikaruga while sloppily sitting on her chair turned her head towards Takeru.

"...it came huh, you harem bastard."

With Ikaruga like that, after coming over with his chair he didn't know where to hide, so he sat between the three.

"A harem... it's quite a bit different from such an exemplary state of affairs, this situation."

"Is that so? I think it's quite the enviable situation from the viewpoint of a regular guy?"

"Also there's only one of them staring at me like that..."

And as she arrived she put a chair right beside gently and hugged him.

"...get used to it."

His shoulders soundly slumped, and so did Takeru.

"Aren't you actually happy...? Kusanagi, you're actually a closet pervert right? Onii〜〜chan."

"Don't say Onii-chan! Being happy or not is not the problem. In the first place, why am I the one to blame? Did I do something?"

“A Relic Eater without asking us for permission! Let's say the contract was justified... because your life was involved. But what is that child? Please tell her to stay quietly in the form of a sword. Make her disappear, I don't like her. You're her owner, aren't you?"

And again, in the end Usagi had no convincing reason.

"I completely agree with that. A walking product of magic, sorry I'll pass. Also Kusanagi, you're getting used to it too much. How deplorable..."

Ouka was unleashing her magic allergy at full power, she laid bare her aversion to Lapis.

Takeru didn't hate Lapis. He might not have been good with handling her, but as a weapon she was first class. He didn't have an aversion towards Magical Heritages. He thought she was strangely cute as she was attached to him.

However, the eyes looking at him were bitter. With that many misunderstandings, it worried Takeru.

For Takeru, this coziness became a problem. Telling him to push her away, he felt intimidated...

Takeru looked at Lapis clinging to his arm.

Lapis noticed Takeru looking at her and tilted her head.

When she stared at him like that not in public...

...I don't dislike it.

He wanted to pat her head slowly, it was such a feeling.

Previously absent minded, now he made a relieved face.

"——Haaa?!"

Noticing that, Ouka and Usagi glared sharply at him.

"W-wait, it's not like that. I wasn't happy because she hugged me. I just thought you were too cruel and felt sorry for her!"

""…………""

"Besides, this girl doesn't listen to me!"

He tried to excuse himself while being caught red handed, the glares of the two sharpened more and more at his advocacy.

Too intimidating, Takeru stood up and hid behind his chair.

"Oh my, you two, can't you be more honest? Isn't it really simple... like this——"

Ikaruga who was watching it while grinning beside them stood up and approached Takeru.

And, she hugged Takeru, making him fall into her large breasts, moreover, she intertwined her legs with Takeru's lower body.

"Suginami-san?! Suginami-san?!?!"

Agitated, Takeru couldn't call her by her first name. Ikaruga moved her captivating chest, trying to push his face deeper in.

"You two also want to do this, right? This guy, he won't resist anyway because he's a hidden pervert. Look, like this."

Takeru was being squeezed between Ikaruga's cleavage. Lapis was also beside him expressionless. Ouka and Usagi were stunned and their faces dyed crimson.

'Awa, awawawa' that was the feeling.

"Oh you, don't move so much... wa-wait a moment, id-idiot! You... that place is——aahnn."

Even though Takeru struggled to get away, apparently his hand slipped through the gap in her shirt, and grabbed Ikaruga's chest with all its might.

A supreme bliss was transferred to his hand. Attempting to pull out his hand, Takeru noticed.

This size——no bra?!

That thought proved Ikaruga's statement that he was a hidden pervert.

Needless to say. Ouka and Usagi, who were watching the scene, stood up looking like demons.

""〜〜! Separate right now! You ero devil——""

...both of them yelled.

Suddenly, the speakers on the ceiling of the classroom, rang out with a little feedback.

Everyone stopped moving, and listened.

《"First grade, students from the 35th platoon, please come to the Chairman's office as soon as possible. Repeat. First grade——"》

The faces of the members of the called out 35th platoon.

From between Ikaruga's breasts, Takeru gave a questioning look.

The faculty tower built close to the forbidden area.

Takeru and the others made it to the top floor, in front of the Chairman's office.

I could understand if I was called but... the whole platoon?"

Embracing anxiety and doubt, Takeru moved towards the Chairman's office on foot.

That's when people came out of the office.

While Takeru wondered who it was, Ouka's legs stopped suddenly.

"? What is it?"

"...no, nothing."

With a somewhat bad expression, Ouka scratched her cheek.

"Someone you know?"

He looked at Ouka who was extremely stiff, the person who came out of Chairman's room walked over towards them.

"Ootori Ouka."

Suddenly hearing a voice, Takeru's shoulders shook.

But even more so, Ouka jumped up in surprise.

It was a quite tall, insightful and strong man. Judging by his appearance, he was about twenty, but his atmosphere felt like he was much older.

His hair was jet black like ink and so was his uniform. It was an unpleasant man whom black color suited.

Takeru whispered to Ouka secretly confirming the situation.

"Who's that?"

When asked in low tone, Ouka answered with trembling lips.

"From when I was in Inquisition... my direct superior."

"Ah, that means one of the Dullahans."

Immediately after, Takeru hit one hand into another, the two men remained expressionless.

"What are you talking about so sneakily."

"O-oh, I apologize!"

Ouka quickly saluted with the Inquisition's unique gesture.

"There's no need to salute. You're a student now."

While making a regretful face, Ouka stopped saluting.

Ouka's direct superior. Which meant the man in front of him was a very influential person among the "Dullahans".

Ouka was unreasonably tense. The man checked the faces of the Small fry Platoon, and said quietly with his eyes closed.

"Section 1 of anti-magic investigators, the Zeroth Extermination Riot Police, Kurogane Hayato, captain of EXE. I've heard about you from the Chairman, it seems you're taking care of Ootori."

He stared at the three other people besides Ouka.

Hayato's eyes looked even more evil than Takeru's, the three others aside from Ikaruga shook in fear. Ikaruga was just calmly chewing a mint candy.

Not referring to the silent attitude of platoon members, he turned to Ouka.

"So, are you doing fine?"

"Uh... that, that is..."

"...just as usual... oh well."

It seemed like he wanted to spout out a sigh at that moment. He seemed to avoid displaying emotions.

"Kusanagi Takeru, is that you?"

"Y...yes! I-it's me!"

Called out, he awkwardly took a single step forward. Hayato observed Takeru carefully.

After looking at him for a moment, he closed his eyes and placed his hand on Takeru's head.

"About Ootori, I leave her to you."

"Y-yes?"

Saying that much, Hayato turned away and walked from the spot.

Quite a big gap from his first impression. Although he didn't understand his intentions completely, he had an impression that he was only a bad conversationalist.

His hand was unexpectedly warm.

"A hard man to grasp. But I don't think he's a bad person... Ootori, details?"

When asked, Ouka spouted a sigh of relief and placed her hand on the wall.

"...umm, Ootori-san?"

"I-I, when captain Kurogane became captain. I was a problem child, and he always advocated for me."

"Hee——, that's good, he's a good person then."

"I wonder about that. I don't know about him in private. Because I have been fired by him... even though it was my own fault, the frightening image still stands."

"Gender equality, that's just like captain Kurogane."

Ouka was trembling with a blue face.

Seeing Ouka this scared was a first. Takeru decided not to touch the topic any more, while switching his feelings prematurely, he knocked on the Chairman's door.

"Come in, come in."

A strangely friendly voice was heard from beyond the door! The voice pissed him off a bit, but Takeru pulled the door knob.

And was greeted,

"Hey hey heeey, thank you for coming my children!"

The stinking Chairman at full power. The whiteness of his hair and clothes was too dazzling as usual.

Everyone already had expressions showing that they were fed up with it.

"Somehow all of you have such damp expressions! You should walk forward cheerfully, a slump can cause hair loss!!"

Not knowing the reason for their damp expressions, Sougetsu clapped strangely, increasing Takeru's tension.

"Umm...what is it this time?"

"Oh, aren't you in a hurry. Are you so motivated? Then I'll jump straight to the topic."

Sougetsu clapped with both hands.

"This time for you all, I have a special mission. That's the reason I called you all while allowing you to skip two periods."

"——Please wait a moment."

Hearing "a special mission", Takeru interrupted out Sougetsu's words.

"I understand why I was called out, because of the Relic Eater I promised to cooperate with Chairman. However please don't get them involved."

Saying that clearly, Takeru stood in front of Sougetsu with a resolute attitude.

If this was a special mission, Takeru guessed there would be nasty things like a Hero attack.

He couldn't trust this man called Ootori Sougetsu, he had learned that a month ago. Although he intended to agree with this man's demands, he could not afford to involve his comrades.

"I understand your feelings, but well, I'm sorry for involving them in that fight."

"...that means you won't back off."

"I think you're misunderstanding. I'm not going to order them. It's only up to those three whether they want to do it or not."

With that said, after a brief moment he turned around in surprise.

The three behind him averted their eyes.

"You guys..."

"I-I think it's a good opportunity to get promoted! I have no intention of remaining a goldfish's poop, It's a chance to gain recognition among the upper echelons!"

"I was originally a Relic Eater contractor, us working together is obvious... also, you... promised... didn't you."

He was unsure about Ouka's and Usagi's reasons. But why was Ikaruga?

Takeru directed his gaze at her, Ikaruga put a mint candy in her mouth.

"Because we can skip?"

He felt like he wouldn't understand what was up with her thinking circuits for the rest of his life.

"Okay, enough with the love comedy. All platoon members are going to have a special mission together this time."

Somehow dissatisfied, he couldn't consider pros and cons of his comrades participating before listening to the mission content, Takeru judged reluctantly.

Thinking it was about time to explain the contents of the mission, Sougetsu looked towards the room in the back, towards a room that looked like a servant's room.

"Mari-kun, come in."

Sougetsu called an unfamiliar name. After a while, they heard the serving room's door open. A girl appeared.

A girl wearing a brand new uniform of AntiMagic Academy, she came next to the chairman with a sullen attitude. Despite wearing a uniform, she wore a casket hat, and had a scarf wrapped around her neck even though it wasn't cold.

"This girl is Nikaido Mari-kun. I want you guys to protect her."

"Guard her... is it?"

"Oh by the way guys, do you know about the ethical committee?"

"...well about that, a little."

Why did that name come out at a time like this, thought Takeru.

The ethics committee, and Ethics of Witch Trial committee (EoWT).

It referred to a human rights organization protecting witches, standing against unfair discrimination and arrests by Inquisition, and complaining about excessive use of self-defense.

Handling the witch's treatment was it's main role.

The power of Inquisition had been unshakable before, however in recent years, there was an influence of the ethics committee that could not be ignored.

"In fact this time on a request from the Ethics Committee, we will implement a trial witches admission system. You know this system, right?"

Takeru had heard about this system as well.

"To be more exact, it's a system that allows witches to get used to Inquisition."

Sougetsu explained loudly, Ouka who was standing behind came a step forward.

Her expression was grim.

"Chairman... you can't mean...!"

Ouka looked at Nikaido Mari who stood next to the carefree Sougetsu.

Sougetsu confirmed and even laughed cheerfully.

"Yeah. Nikaido Mari-kun is unquestionably a witch."

Takeru was a bit surprised, but Ouka's gaze sharpened even more.

"I'm surprised. You who refused all requests from Committee suddenly accepted, I wonder why."

"It's not like I always refused. We have been cooperating in investigations and weapon development, I thought it's not a bad idea for a while. Also, there's no harm since there's the Gleipnir, I judged there is no problem."

Gleipnir was a collar that allowed control over a witch's magic.

This collar was made for witches that were not criminals, made by cooperation of Inquisition and Alchemist's weapon development company. A witch without a criminal record who wore a Gleipnir was allowed to leave the forbidden area and live a normal life.

Takeru had seen people called witches, who were wearing Gleipnir.

They were still discriminated, but it was not as bad as in the past.

A view of normal people and witches chatting was nothing out of the ordinary nowadays.

That was why, even if he was told Mari is a witch, it didn't surprise him much.

"——I'm against this!"

Ouka protested against Sougetsu rudely.

"Inquisition was made to judge witches, accepting a witch in Inquisition is illogical!"

"We do not judge witches, we're an organization made in order to judge evil witches. Innocents are not recognized as our enemies. And I told you before, protecting the witches is our job as well."

"I know! But why do we have to protect her?! This is the place of Inquisition, it is too dangerous for her!"

There was some truth to Ouka's words.

Inquisition was built around the philosophy of fighting against magic. It was necessary to show off a proper attitude and go through with it. Otherwise, the significance of Inquisition would be shaken.

If the police broke the law, they'd lose trust. If the police borrowed the power of a criminal, they'd be called incompetent.

Although it would be equally true with the presence of Relic Eaters, if it became a situation in which you couldn't compete against magic without magic, public opinion would grow skeptical of the Inquisition.

"I know how you feel, but I want you to stop mixing your personal feelings in this."

"I-it's not because of my personal feelings!"

"Your hatred against witches is a well known fact."

"...this and that are two different things...!"

"No matter what you say, there will be no change in policy. In order to eliminate discrimination against witches, we'll continue accepting them in the future."

Unable to agree with Sougetsu's decision, Ouka clenched her fist and looked down.

"She will be the commemorative first person. Mari-san, please greet them."

Grinning and laughing, he encouraged Mari who was standing behind to self-introduce herself.

After taking one step forward, Mari looked up slightly.

"...greetings."

She lowered her head abruptly and took a step backwards.

There was nothing in particular about Takeru, however there was a negative aura from the other members of the platoon, their faces were crooked.

"I think I'll let you guys take care of her escort. Mari-kun doesn't know anything about the school, I want you to help her in various ways."

"Why did you pick us...? Wouldn't it be better to ask a professional Inquisitor?"

Ouka spoke, in her voice were thorns and barbs, Sougetsu lifted his index finger.

"What would everyone think if she had an Inquisitor as a guard? Since such convenient students like you are here... oops that was rude. Since there's talent meeting the demands in this place."

His real intent had accidentally slipped out.

"Also, about Mari-kun being a witch, keep if confidential for a while. If we say a witch has suddenly been admitted, she might be bullied? When Mari-kun is familiar with the school, then we'll formally announce it, listen guys, you have to protect her."

Protect a witch. A mission honestly unheard of.

Sougetsu laughed cheerfully, while hitting Takeru's back.

"And that's that! I leave it to you! I don't care about second period, guide her around the school."

He was careful when they were called by the president, because he thought they would be charged with a dangerous mission, he was relieved at the same time as he thought it was anticlimactic.

A mission of this degree should not be dangerous for his platoon members.

It was just guarding in name, it was more like taking care of a transfer student who didn't know anything, that was what he thought.

Anyone could do it, an easy task.

No, wait.

Takeru's relief was only momentary, he withdrew it immediately.

He thought again, a simple mission that anyone could do.

...it can't be... it's about our platoon?

Timidly, Takeru looked behind.

There, the three stood there emanating an earthquake-like feeling of not wanting to get along.

And again he looked forward, looking at Mari.

"...hmph."

Mari removed her gaze from Takeru at whom she had been staring at, and made a sipping sound with her nose.

Not a single person intended to cooperate.

Perhaps, was this a super difficult mission? He felt a cold feeling going down his spine confirming it.

And this, was the Small Fry Platoon's special mission.

It started with immediate entanglement of human relations.

Chapter 2 - Witch Enlisted

At about the same time as Mari and Takeru met at school.

Haunted who fled leaving Mari behind in the church, was monitoring the AntiMagic Academy's school gate from one of the nearby towers ever since last night.

Because of the terrorist attack the other day, the school's security had been reinforced; Spriggans and several dragoons have been deployed.

He placed his hand on his chin, as his hair that was moved by the wind stroked his cheek and he let out a nihilistic laugh.

"...what to do now."

Despite acting cool, it didn't seem like his real feelings were just as cool.

《"You reap what you sow. That's what you get for making Mari carry forgetting charms rather than self-destruction ones, this is the result of that."》

The western sword that was brought to his waist, Dáinsleif blamed him inside his head.

"Impossible. There's no option of me killing Mari-san. To do such a wasteful thing...! I have to mentally bully that girl more! You also think so, right? Nacht!"

《"I won't agree with your inclinations, I told you that before right?"》

"The incident in the church was unbearable. That blushed face... so much tears in her eyes... such... she raised such a voice... really unbearable."

《"Yes yes, excited aren't you."》

"And erect too."

《"So it went that far..."》

"I'm not a guy who would play around after just seeing such a face. I want to reconcile with Mari-san who has such a chagrined expression, and make her realize I'm not her enemy."

Saying that, Haunted returned to normal.

"...With that said, this is a pretty bad situation. Mari-san was captured the moment I showed a small opening... and look where her legs took her. Is it by any chance, my fault?"

《"You were too flashy with corpse collection and killed civilians like an idiot to collect parts. It's possible to hide it when bodies of criminals are missing, but when it comes to the general public, Inquisition will definitely make their move. Probably a Banshee has infiltrated one of the hired parties. That's how I see it."》

"Hmm... it seems like I can't afford to leave it. For the sake of my love, and for the sake of Valhalla. Or maybe, maybe Mari-san is being tortured in an obscene way...! S-such a thing! I can't wait! I definitely have to visit her!"

《"...calm down already. For the time being lets report to the higher ups, let's ask them what to do now. I'm connecting us now. Connected."》

《"——You screwed up, Haunted.》

He heard a female voice which sounded like a bell.

"I have nothing to say in my defense. Unexpectedly capable! The Inquisition is!"

《"It's not a situation that can be laughed off. You took full responsibility for this operation. You should have proceeded slowly with our help."》

"Carrying out terrorism by using a Hero and avoiding any sacrifices, is that not too much to ask for? No, well, it failed, hahaha."

《"I don't remember any orders for terrorism. The rescue operation was decided with Valhalla's consensus, the careless slaughter and terrorism was caused by your lack of morals."》

"Ahahahaha, I really can't refute that."

《"Because of sorcerers like you, innocent witches are persecuted by non-witches. Realize it already; our aim is not showing off our power, nor is getting rid of non-witches."》

"Right. Even so, aren't you employing a witch like me because you need power? Am I wrong?"

《"Shut your mouth."》

Haunted settled down quietly and happily squinted.

《"About the aftermath of this case, you can only count on yourself. You will not get any support from here."》

"I am aware of that."

《"Charms for forgetting that were in possession of Nikado Mari have already been confirmed to be activated. It seems like she activated her magical barrier in time, complete erasure of memories was blocked and her memory should start to recover soon."》

"As expected of my idol. Not an easy one. I'm getting even more excited."

《"The forgetting charms effect seems like it will last for three days, you need to settle it before then."》

"The method?"

《"Not specified. Please consider prevention of information leakage as main priority."》

Hearing that reply, Haunted burst into maniacal laughter.

"...A hypocrite as always, that pains me so much, oh Mother Goose. You embody the virtue called "hypocrisy", how wonderful."

It wasn't irony or anything, they were heartfelt words,

They were followed by silence.

《"Everything... for the sake of helpless witches."》

The communication was disconnected with a *bzzt*, Haunted closed his eyes.

"Now, what to do."

《"They should be vigilant in the forbidden area because the Hero suicide attack was aimed at that section. It's better to give up on frontal breakthrough."》

What do we do? Asked Nacht.

Haunted dismissed those baseless fears snorting with laughter.

"Same as science and technology, magic is also evolving. It's more makeshift, more cunning, more clever, and more brutal."

《"It was a stupid question. When it comes to makeshift and bad taste, your magic is a prime example."》

Hearing Nacht say that, Haunted laughed with embarrassment.

《"I wasn't being sarcastic."》

"Really?!"

《"So, do you have any idea? Like infiltrating, or laying a trap, that sort of thing. I can't say there's a lot of flattering information from within the school grounds."》

"What are you saying, there is quite a bit right? Even though it's all obtained from test platoon members."

Haunted told Nacht while gesturing with both of his hands.

《"Yeah, indeed."》

Replied Nacht, disgusted.

"Well, this is convenient too. They did kill the Hero, it's really interesting indeed. I want to say hello to them using this opportunity too."

Saying that, Haunted looked up to the sky.

There wasn't a single cloud in the sky worthy of being called azure, it was wonderful weather.

"Hexennacht has just began."

While looking towards the sky, Haunted's face was displaying madness.

"Well then, everyone——shall we prepare a bonfire?"

His face distorted with very, very happy laughter.

* * *

After leaving the chairman's room, Takeru wanted to introduce Nikado Mari to other the platoon members and guide her around the school... however,

"I can do without it... can you leave me alone?"

These were the first words Mari spoke.

The Small Fry Platoon members solidified. It was a reaction Takeru half-expected already.

"But... aren't we supposed to guard you?"

"It's fine, guarding or whatever. Not like I asked for it, I didn't come here because I wanted to either."

She said that as she thrust her hand into her pocket, facing in other direction.

In response to such attitude, the fury voltage of his platoon comrades rose to tremendous levels.

"I'm not going to run away, so you can leave me alone. Being together with you is annoying, that's all."

Mari cast a scornful gaze toward Takeru making him shrink.

This will probably be more troublesome than the issue with Ouka when she was enlisted. He thought.

Looking behind him, Takeru whispered to the other members of the Small Fry Platoon.

"W-what do we do about this?"

"Isn't it fine to leave her alone to do whatever she wants? With Gleipnir on, she's the same as a normal person is she not? Why do we have to guard a woman like that?"

Said Usagi,

"Rather than her being a witch, it's her character that's a problem. It's too troublesome, I'm also in favor of leaving her alone."

Ikaruga expressed her opinion as well, their stance was already predictable.

"We can't do that, obviously. What are you two talking about?"

These words came out of Ouka's mouth, she preached the other members while crossing her arms.

"This is a mission. As Inquisition we cannot allow a witch to roam freely."

Ouka stiffly spoke her mind. Usagi and Ikaruga retorted together.

""Read the mood!!""

"Wha-! Why are you talking about me being unable to read the atmosphere now... isn't that obvious as part of Inquisitio—"

"That's why I hate honor students. Besides, we don't have to take part in this mission in the first place... we aren't getting any points for it either. Also, we're not part of Inquisition yet anyway."

Usagi cut in half-way through Ouka's speech.

"Th-that's right but... even I don't want to guard a witch, I feel the same as you guys, yeah. B-but again, this is a mission!"

I'm reading the atmosphere, she tried to justify herself saying that.

Because Ouka's communication skills were close to non-existent, she had a very hard time adapting to the Small Fry Platoon.

Though, even picky Ikaruga and Usagi accepted her recently. Being labeled as someone who can't read the atmosphere, she tried hard to stop being branded as such.

"If you really think so, then request Chairman to change the mission. You're his daughter right, Ootori. Use your connections for something useful. Having him as your father gives you such advantages right?"

Being told that by Ikaruga, Ouka got confused.

"I-if I could do so I would have already. That man won't agree to my request, he hasn't done so even a single time."

"......haaaaaa...... you're useless aren't you."

Usagi sighed heavily. As expected, Ouka's pride acted up and she pointed towards Usagi,

"I don't want to be told that by a Saionji!!"

"Whaaat?! Just what about me is useless?!!"

As usual, Usagi erupted with anger.

The Small Fry Platoon operated today the same as usual. Takeru sighed as he glanced to the side at Mari.

Well that aside, what on earth is this Nikaido girl...?

As the first from the witch enrollment system, she should have entered the school in high spirits. However, no matter how he look at her attitude, she's not friendly at all.

"Hey, Lapis... did you hear anything from Chairman about the escort target?"

Used to the pointless quarrels, he noticed Lapis again cling to his arm like before.

She looked towards Takeru with her marble-like eyes and tilted her neck.

"............"

Takeru furrowed his brows and tilted his neck as well.

".................."

Lapis in response tilted her neck to the other side.

"........................I see, you didn't hear anything. Got it."

Because this squabble seemed to continue forever, Takeru cut in. Despite that, Ouka and Usagi still continued to argue.

Not knowing what to do, Takeru looked towards Mari.

"...eh? Where did Nikaido go?"

Before he knew it, Mari disappeared from there.

As Takeru said that, other members looked towards the place Mari stood at.

After standing around for a solid three seconds, Ouka began to panic.

"——Kusanagi! Why didn't you watch her!"

"Eeh? I was the one responsible for that?!"

"It happened because you were flirting with that Magical Heritage!"

"Ummm... sorry."

Though it was unreasonable, he still apologized instinctively.

"Damn it, Suginami and Saionji go towards the main gate! Kusanagi, cafeteria! I'm heading to the courtyard!"

"Isn't it better to ignore it? Let her do as she wants."

Said Usagi in response,

"Who do you think you are. You're in no position to order me around."

Ikaruga opposed her as well,

"Guhhhh... Kusanagi!!"

Ouka's eyes teared up and she yelled at Takeru for some reason.

It meant "you're the captain so give out the orders properly".

Takeru thought for a moment, and came to conclusion that he can't leave it like this.

He knew despite knowing that everyone hated it, a mission was a mission. Moreover, it didn't involve too much risk either, it won't be like the horrible Hero incident from the previous attack.

The result for the platoon won't be bad.

Takeru felt like seeing a little more of Ouka's valuable teary-eyed expression, but he spoke to everyone——

"It's as Ootori said, it's a direct order from the Chairman. It's going to be a problem if she's lost. I can understand your feelings, however I want you to do as Ootori said."

As usual, it was more like a request than captain's order,

Usagi and Ikaruga scattered to search for Mari.

"Haa... problems right away."

He lowered his shoulders and sighed.

And, suddenly his clothes were pulled lightly.

"...what is it, Lapis?"

He noticed Lapis wasn't moving and she stared at a spot nearby.

"Host."

It seems like she will not refer to him as "Onii-chan." when they're alone.

He was a bit surprised to notice he was a bit disappointed as he listened to her.

"Magic power consumption is above the standard. Recommending energy recharge. Approaching activity limit soon."

"? What do you mean? Magic power... I don't have any magic right?"

"I am aware. Magic power isn't required. I'm going to explain the current situation in quick and easy to understand fashion."

Immediately after...

**groowwll*, he heard a quiet and cute sound.*

While looking up in Takeru's eyes with her own glass-like pupils, Lapis said,

"Stomach is empty."

Takeru had to buy anpan and milk as he searched for Mari.

* * *

"...haa."

Mari sighed as she pressed a button on the vending machine in the courtyard.

She put her hand in the outlet after she heard a rumbling sound and picked up the ejected strawberry cider.

Without opening it, she rested her back on the vending machine and looked towards the sky blankly.

"Why do I have to do such a thing..."

Even though she complained, her memories weren't coming back.

Things she remembered were, the fact that she was a witch, world's common sense, and knowledge on magic and magic power. The memory she has been missing is one that concerns herself. Who is she and where is she from, where did she grew up, who was she raised by, what kind of life she lived... there were no memories of these things.

"Ughh, it's annoying. Even my own name doesn't ring a bell. Really, what is going on."

According to the Chairman, she was rescued when she was found unconscious at an investigation scene. Seems like they knew her name after investigating her belongings, seems like she's being protected in school out of compassion. She was the first recruit of the new witch admission system that was just introduced.

The hard part was the fact that she didn't have memories and she didn't know much. The Chairman said that she will remember eventually, however that didn't wipe away the anxiety that came from not knowing who she is.

"...being protected despite being a witch, was I a criminal? But if that were the case I would be confined in the forbidden area... aaah, I don't get it!!"

She didn't know why Inquisition did that, honestly, she didn't want to know. Why did she think like that, was another unknown.

That's what her intuition told her, she stomped the ground hard while spitting curses.

"——Nikaido Mari!"

Suddenly called by her name, Mari looked towards the voice's owner.

The distinctive sunset-colored hair.

Certainly, her name was Ootori Ouka. Apparently she was the Chairman's daughter, but they didn't look alike at all.

The first impression she had of Ouka was probably... incompatible. That's it.

"Don't run away on your own, our mission is to guard you. Report to us when you're about to move."

Ouka told her while looking at her intimidatingly.

Hearing that bossy attitude, with a snap, Mari's expression displayed fury.

Her intuition that told her they're incompatible was right on the mark.

"My throat was dry so I just came to buy some juice, do I need your permission to do something like that? Or maybe you're a stalker?!"

Being called a stalker, Ouka also snapped.

"Wrong. We are to guard y——"

"I didn't ask for it, I told you haven't I. Honestly, it's annoying."

After being rejected in that manner, a disturbing shadow appeared on Ouka's face.

Ouka closed in on Mari and glared at her face.

"Don't flatter yourself. If I wasn't ordered to, I wouldn't guard a witch li——"

"Then it's fine not to. Are you an idiot?"

"That won't do. Even if I don't want to, it's an order from the Chairman."

"Are you one of those who discriminate witches? Well, I don't really care. Your overbearing attitude is annoying me every single time. Or maybe you're acting like that towards everyone?"

"What I hate is not witches, it's the magic itself."

Mari's expression that only repeatedly ridiculed and provoked changed.

Anger that was oozing out has manifested strongly.

"I don't care if you say bad things about me. But, stop calling magic itself bad."

Mari herself didn't know why she remembered to get angry when magic was insulted. However, she felt that it was absolutely inexcusable.

While Mari was surprised by her outburst, Ouka flashed a probing smile.

"What, you little... you acknowledge magic despite aiming to be an Inquisitor? You're a dangerous one."

"Y...yeah! I acknowledge it! As long as magic is not misused it can save people!"

"Humans are fine even without magic! Humans are not so weak, they don't have to rely on miracles!"

"Inquisition is also relying on magic aren't they! Relic Eaters are Magical Heritages, and processing technology of anti-magical materials is a product of alchemy!"

"That's because of you damn witches using magic! If you bastards didn't use any magic, we wouldn't have to use any either!"

Even though it was just a quarrel at first, it evolved into an explosive situation already.

Both of them leaned towards each other to the point it looked like they'll start fighting soon, sparks appeared between them.

If not for Mari, Ouka wouldn't act so extremely. She couldn't say that she isn't discriminating against witches, and that she has sympathy for humans who didn't want to become witches yet did, and wanted to protect them from unfair discrimination and accusations. She understood that it's one of Inquisition's roles.

However, for some reason——I can't stand this woman!

She couldn't stand the majority of the Inquisition, but she understood that punishing evil witches was a just cause. For Mari, witches are normal humans. Criminals are just criminals, and good people are just good people. False accusations aside, judging those who deserve to be judged is justice.

But, this woman——is annoying me somehow!

And the root of this physiological aversion are their incompatible personalities.

As the two quarreled, the reason itself changed gradually, and it became a shouting contest.

Although both of them seemed to have just arguments, they were incompatible like oil and water.

Ouka was the type that repelled others, and Mari was one as well.

"You... these hair accessories don't fit you at all!"

"Wha... you too, that scarf and hat are violating school rules, they're a pain to look at."

When it finally developed into a shouting match about appearance, suddenly a figure appeared from the side,

"——Both of you, stop itttt! Stoooppp!!"

It was Takeru, he entered between the two separating them, he tried to act as a mediator.

"You're in the way!" "Don't interfere."

——A ferocious right straight came flying from both sides.

Takeru's cheeks looked like a persimmon that was squashed by a car. He lifelessly collapsed.

The two of them on both sides regained sanity after hitting him and let out an "Ah.".

And Takeru whose cheeks were bit into by fists of the two, collapsed without raising a sound and started weeping.

"S-sorry Kusanagi! Are you alright...?"

"...hm-hmph. Suddenly getting in between is bad you know."

While his cheeks were rubbed by Ouka, Takeru seemed to have been bitten by the hot role of middle manager.

"I-it's not my fault."

Even as she spat curses, Mari felt a faint guilt. She was casting glances checking on Takeru's state.

"Ughh... it hurts."

While sadly rubbing both of his cheeks, he moaned in pain as he sat on a nearby bench.

There was no longer any sight of Ouka, she was entrusted with reporting to Ikaruga and Usagi

If those two join in, it might develop into a fistfight without reservations.

"...good grief."

Really, good grief. Takeru sighed and looked down.

That's when, a canned juice appeared in his field of view.

As he lifted his face up, there was,

"Nn."

Mari held four cans next to her chest, she curtly offered one to Takeru. Not understanding her intent, he stared in wonder.

"...nnn!"

Mari furrowed her brows and held out the further.

"Umm! It's... fine to drink it?"

"〜〜〜. Cool it with it... "

"Aah, that's what you mean, danke."

Takeru finally noticed her concern and took three cans from her, he gave one to Lapis who sat next to him and he used the remaining two to cool down his burning cheeks.

"Haa——, this, this feels good."

"...i-is that so."

Mari replied curtly and sat down next to Takeru.

Facing her feet the other way, Mari sipped the black coffee. The moment she drank a grimace was visible, it seemed like she forced herself to drink it black despite disliking it.

Maybe she wanted the one Takeru had his cheek against, the strawberry cider.

"Sorry about that..."

Takeru apologized to her, Mari blushed and showed consternation.

"I wanted to drink black in the first place."

Correcting himself in a hurry, Takeru released the juice he held against his cheek.

"Ootori. That fellow, whenever she encounters anything magical, blood rushes to her head."

"...I'm not bothered by that."

"She has her circumstances. But she's not a bad fellow, please forgive her for that."

As Takeru apologized on behalf of Ouka, Mari made a questioning look.

"Why are you apologizing? Are you an idiot?"

"An idiot... you... saying it out so clearly, even if I really am an idiot, it still hurts."

"I'm a witch right? Your enemy. That woman's reactions are normal."

"...? Just being a witch isn't enough to make you an enemy. You came to join Inquisition, that makes us family already."

Being told they're family, she made a face saying "Haa?".

"Are you really an Inquisitor? Isn't doubting part of your job?"

"Well I'm still a student..."

"Don't believe people so easily... are you stupid?"

Saying that, Mari drank the black coffee all at once.

"...guh... with such a tone, you won't know when I'll stab you in the back."

With a tremendously bitter face, she threw the coffee can towards the trash.

It drew a parabola dancing in the air.

clank.

But, it hit the edge of trash can; fell on the ground and rolled.

"..........."

"…………"

Mari stood up, walked towards the can lying on the ground, picked it up and threw it in the trash before casually walking back to sit on the bench.

Seeing that series of action, Takeru tried to endure, but he couldn't defy the urge.

"Bfft... kuhaha! Hahahaha!"

"Wh- why are you laughing?!"

"Dahaha, sorry, sorry! Just, you did such a proper thing after saying a villainous line, that was really surprising."

"What?! Isn't that normal?! Anyone would throw it in the trash properly!"

Mari protested while waving her arms, her face was red like an apple.

It looked funny causing Takeru to laugh again.

"I-Indeed.....anyone would....put the can back——pfttt!"

"〜〜〜〜〜〜!! I missed so it couldn't be helped!! I wanted to act cool by getting it in〜〜ngh〜〜!!"

Mari was in the mood to beat him up at the moment, she started to hit Takeru.

Takeru apologized many times saying "Sorry, sorry." while laughing all the time .

Five minutes later, Takeru who was finally forgiven sat on the bench again and flashed a soft smile towards Mari.

"Are you still laughing? Should I keep beating you?"

"S-sorry,... that's not it, I just thought again, that witches are normal human beings after all."

Mari hearing Takeru's carefree laugh turned away unable to maintain her anger anymore.

"Stop sugar-coating things. You entered the Inquisition because you hate witches didn't you."

"Not everyone has such a stupid reason to enter... what about you?"

"About what?"

"Why does Nikaido want to enter Inquisition? Why do people want to become witches, things like that, I'm kind of curious about it."

As he said that, embarrassment appeared on Mari's face.

This is... I said something good.

Mari closed her eyes and thought for a moment, she smiled despite sweating and raised her index finger.

"I-I want... I want to change the way the world views all magic as dangerous... yes, that's it. I am here to prove that magic can save a lot of people, that's why I came here!"

Nodding a few times, Mari talks about her aspiration.

"It's just as that woman said, magic is often used to harm people, but at the same time it can help many people."

Saying that, Mari leaned towards Takeru.

"Did you know? Some diseases that can't be cured with modern medicine can often be cured with the use of magic. Of course the opposite is also true, but isn't it stupid not to utilize its benefits? There are many people that can be saved thanks to magic, isn't it weird to get rid of it instead of using it like that?"

"Oh? Mm, yeah, that's right."

"And, also, even using mental interference magic like hypnosis that's hated so much, can be used in mental care to get rid of things like insomnia, with enough time it could be even used to treat various brain diseases. Isn't that amazing?"

"It is amazing."

"Right? And, also——"

Mari innocently spoke of magic's usefulness.

Takeru was overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, but he did not pull back. To think Mari was this fond of magic, it looked quite cute.

Mari continued to talk passionately, she stood up holding out her fist in front of her.

"The current state where the usefulness of magic is being suppressed because it is judged to be hazardous, I can't stand it! I'll prove it by any means! For that, evil witches and sorcerers will be judged! It makes sense for me, a witch to do it! That's why I turned to Inquisition, if I do the right thing, that way... if I do that magic will... not all of it is bad... to everyone..."

Though Mari was really heated up, she noticed that he gradually became idle. She sat back on the bench uncomfortably and looked away.

Mari herself was surprised to learn she loved magic so much.

She'll be made fun of anyway, already deciding that's going to happen... as she though that, Takeru smiled softly.

"Isn't that great."

Mari lifted her face and gave a questioning look.

"I don't know much about such difficult things, but I found out what motivates you. I think it's great."

"What is... so great?"

"It's nice isn't it. You want to change the bad image magic has? Wanting to prove you can save people thanks to magic, once the world accepts it... that definitely can't be anything but a good thing."

Mari tilted her head, looking at him as if seeing such a creature for the first time.

"...you are... strange."

"First an idiot, and now I'm strange..."

"Don't you have a prejudice against things like witches or magic?"

"It's not like I don't. But I don't think all of it is bad, is it? Even witches, it's not like all of them are bad, that's already been proven. That's why organizations like the ethics committee appeared."

"..........."

".........w-what is it."

"......you're weird after all."

She muttered in wonder.

However, the thorns that could be seen in her expression ever since she quarreled with Ouka disappeared. Mari stood up from the bench, she looked at Takeru's face as she put her hand on her hip.

"Hey, tell me your name."

"Didn't I tell you before?"

"I wasn't interested so I forgot."

"Hey!"

"But now I'm boiling with interest, tell me."

Mari asked with an unchanged questioning gaze and a smile. With a somewhat teasing gesture, it somehow reminded Takeru of a cat.

Takeru replied shortly,

"It's Kusanagi Takeru."

"Mmm? Takeru... Takeru huh. Ahahaha, sounds like a name of a samurai."

That's when Takeru saw Mari's smile for the first time.

A very ordinary smile, just like any other girl's.

Mari held out her right hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Takeru."

"Yeah, umm, suddenly calling me by first name."

"Is that no good? "Kusanagi" isn't cute at all, is it?"

"Well, it's fine."

"You should call me Mari too."

"That helps a lot, calling you Nikaido is difficult."

Takeru took her hand and lightly squeezed it back.

That's when. **squeeze**, something grabbed the sleeve of his uniform.

"Host."

It was Lapis. She grabbed his clothes and looked up at him with her glass-like eyes just like usual.

"It bothered me for a while already, who is this child?"

"...ummm, for now she is my...... little sister."

"Hmmm... dreadfully dissimilar."

I think so too, is what Takeru wanted to say.

squeeze, Lapis pulled on his clothes again.

Takeru with an expressionless look on his face bent down and matched Lapis' line of sight.

What is it this time?

"Energy overcharge has occurred. Intake of H2O is over capacity in the current humanoid form."

"...umm! That's... that means... what?"

Takeru asked, Lapis touched her inner thigh and started fidgeting suddenly.

fidget. **fidget** **fidget** **fidget** **fidget**.

Because of this motion, Takeru understood everything.

"Wait a moment! I can't do anything about that right?!"

"I see. Then——"

"Wwwwwwwwwaaaaaaa!! I get it! Don't take it off!."

Takeru ran towards the school while embracing Lapis who attempted to take off her skirt.

Because he couldn't enter the area forbidden for boys, he asked Mari for help.

Takeru apologized to Mari for having her suddenly help with such an outrageous thing.

She responded with,

"I'm accustomed to caring for children."

With a bitter smile.

But that's where,

"But... why am I accustomed to it..."

Mari questioned herself as she smiled.

"Hnn", she groaned.

The Glossary

Hexennacht（ヘクセンナハト）- It's written as（魔女の宴）meaning Banquet of the Witches, for more info google it.

Chapter 3 - Worst Compatibility

"Umm——...... Though it will be the second time this month, we have another transfer student ——"

Students who waited for the lecture in the classroom were dumbfounded after being told such a thing by the teacher.

Everyone's line of sight was directed towards the discouraged girl standing next to the platform.

The girl wore an AntiMagic Academy uniform, but she also wore a hat and a muffler on her neck despite being indoors. Her expression was rather sullen, as if everyone in front of her was enemy.

"This is Nikaido Mari-kun. Please do get along. Well then, introduce yourself."

The teacher encouraged her to introduce herself.

Mari stepped forward after glancing at teacher without moving her head.

"Nice to meet you."

After facing completely other way and lowering her head slightly, she took another step forward.

Hearing that overly-short self-introduction, students gave her a questioning look.

"Ah——, Kusanagi."

"...yes?"

Being called by the teacher, Takeru stood up from his chair in a hurry.

"The Chairman said that you're the one to take care of Nikaido. That's why she's going to sit next to you."

The talk about Lapis had already turned into harassment.

Now eyes of the surrounding boys turned dark.

Why do only you get all the preferential treatment.

You can't do anything else than swordsmanship, so why?

That eroge bastard.

The gazes accusing him of such false charges weighed heavily on Takeru's shoulders.

But that wasn't all.

From two people in the back... emanated resentment far surpassing that.

He cowered after casting a mere sidelong glance. A small blonde animal, and a human with sunset-colored hair, they were watching him with tremendous intent and their hair stood up defying gravity.

Prompted by the teacher, Mari still acting discouraged with a hand in her pocket came over. She stopped in front of Takeru who was shedding tears and she looked towards Ouka who was in the back seat.

When their line of sight met, sparks appeared in mid-air.

"......hmph."

With an unpleasant disagreeable attitude Mari moved her gaze from Ouka and sat down.

Because of the quarrel next to the vending machine, Ouka and Mari's rivalry was blooming.

They spent two periods acting as guides, and all platoon members came back to participate in the third period.

Third period was a basic physical fitness test. Running and high jump.

kyaa* *kyaa, screams and noise came out from the women's group. Ouka wearing gym clothes glanced at Mari.

Mari, a little bit away from where student's gathered gave Ouka an annoyed look.

"............"

Ouka who was glaring at Mari faced towards the front.

At the same time as the teacher's whistle sounded, Ouka began to run at high speed.

And, beautifully like a mermaid that shot out from the water surface's she jumped over the bar with a high jump.

Bright cheers resounded, there was an uproar among female students.

Ouka fixed her hair and got up from the mat with a cool look on her face.

"Next, Nikaido Mari."

After being called, Mari came out in front.

Everyone's attention gathered. Other students' gazes all concentrated on her, she even felt the gaze of male students looking from behind the distant fence.

Mari fixed her hat again and got in position.

Her appearance looked quite good. She looked like a cool girl. Her movements looked very proudly, especially with her boyish get-up.

The moment the teacher sounded his whistle, Mari started running. Cutting through the wind

She rushed forward towards the bar. And——*gachin*.

As Mari tried to jump back she smashed the back of her head into it without leaping at all and sank into the mat. Students that saw this scene fell silent altogether. Everyone's eyes betrayed disappointment.

"〜〜〜"

Mari tried to get away by crawling down from the mat while rubbing the back of her head, she had watery eyes.

And she noticed someone's foot in front of her.

"…………"

The one looking down on Mari who was on all fours, was Ouka.

Ouka smiled from ear to ear mockingly.

Mari made a frustrated expression, and growled.

After one hour of exercise, Mari's lack of motor senses was exposed.

Fourth period, anti-magic science class.

"Let's talk about magic attributes that witches carry. First, attributes are a tendency the phantom instrument has when it produces magic power, like fire element or water element. Magic power, unless converted into a spell by using a magical procedure, isn't just energy. Well, in human language, it's flowing within them like blood."

On top of the platform, the teacher had teaching materials in each hand.

"Type A is methodical but indecisive, Type O is a slob, but he has good leadership, an unclear character assessment isn't it? It's completely baseless, it's the same as that, a fire attribute is magic that is suitable for fire magic, its compatibility with water magic is poor. However, that doesn't mean that witches cannot use a water attribute magic because she's a fire element. Everyone, I want you keep this in mind when you oppose witches. Magic is also called a flexible material, it can be applied to any type of material, particles or operation, no matter what attribute it is. It becomes a much more complex magical procedure than normal though, no matter what attribute it is. Even with bad compatibility, opposite attribute magic can be used. Don't drop your guard just because you know your enemy's attribute."

Listening to the teacher's long speech, Takeru started dozing off and his head hit the desk.

"Now, a problem. Between magic attributes, there is one attribute that cannot be used by any other type of magic. What's the term describing that special type of magic... does anyone know the answer?"

As the teacher asked a question, all students looked up. Takeru lifted his head up in a hurry pretending to be calm.

No one raised their hands, it's not like they didn't know the answer to the teacher's question. The problem is not having that knowledge before enrolling in school.

However, this teacher is known for being nasty. The students that are caught with a simple question are going to be challenged with a next ones in succession.

"............"

Ouka seeing that no one else raised their hands, reluctantly raised hers.

"Okay then, Ootori."

"It's the Ancient Attribute."

"Is — that — so."

It came, everyone thought.

"Do you know why is it called ancient?"

"It's an attribute witches of old once held, but it's characteristics are fading due to repeated crossing with other attribute holders, it either disappeared or became something else. That means, its holders only appear due to mutations."

"Oh... correct. And what's its alias?"

Alias, as he said that, Ouka's body subtly trembled.

Other student's had all reacted to "The alias.", and had it all over their faces.

As everyone's gazes gathered, Ouka had a difficult expression on her face. The alias of ancient attribute, there was no reason to remember about it. All knowledge possessed by Ouka was used for "Vlad's" usage and investigation. It's not knowledge suited for practical every-day use.

In the first place, this maniacal problem isn't part of the material handled by students.

"...s-sorry, I don't know."

Ouka closed her mouth, and looked down frustrated.

"Hmph. Is there anyone else who can answer it?"

Everyone fell silent, seeing them like that he was about to start preaching again. That's when...

"Yes! Yes yes!"

The student who sat next to Takeru, Nikaido Mari raised her hand before that.

Quite desperately, the teacher pointed at Mari.

"Pure-blood attribute."

"! Hoo, That's correct. You know a lot of things that aren't in the teaching materials."

Students raised their voices in admiration.

"It's still not over—— in that case, name all the Ancient Attributes that you know."

"White flame, Void, Azure, Chaos, Dragon, Gravity, Bloodstone, Crystal, King... Sun and Moon maybe? They're supposed to be fairy tales but... though, there's a lot of others, there's not enough time to name them all."

"And the Tower?"

"Ancient attribute of the tower can be reproduced with two people of earth and two of fire attribute, it takes time, but it can be reproduced. Meaning it's not strictly an ancient attribute?"

"...hmm, that's all, sit down."

Oooh〜〜 voices full of admiration resounded throughout the classroom. Even the teacher let out a small happy laugh.

Mari tried to sit down in her seat without a mishap, she looked back vigorously towards Ouka's seat during the moment she was sitting down, and showed her a smile.

Ouka made a regretful expression, and grumbled.

The morning class ended, it was a lunch break.

All of the Small Fry Platoon members headed to the cafeteria, though everyone gathered in their usual seats and prepared their lunches......

"Such an amazing honor student〜, is there a reason you couldn't answer that problem?"

"What about your reflexes? It was like watching a smelly turtle."

"Turtle?! Y-yy-you, isn't it obvious you can do such a thing because you received military training?!"

"I-Isn't that the same for you! The only area you're specialized in is magic!"

Ouka and Mari stood face to face against each other letting out loud and imposing voices again.

Takeru at that time was pinched in between them and at a loss.

Despite Takeru's anguish, Usagi was glaring at some fliers with a serious expression and Ikaruga was reading a BL novel.

"Umm you guys, I'm not going to tell you to get along, but try to restrain yourselves a bit..."

There fury which was like a raging fire was directed at Takeru who tried to meddle.

"There's no way to get along with this muffler woman!"

"My muffler has nothing to do with it?! I refuse to get along with this muscle-brained woman! She's just jealous of me being so smart!"

"I'm not jealous! I just hate you, that's all!"

"Oh, what a coincidence, I hate you as well!"

After gaining their attention with much effort, the two of them faced off against each other shortly after. Seeing them so obsessed with each other, Takeru started to think if they actually aren't getting along well.

"I told you that you don't have to get along. Ootori, what is our mission? Guarding Mari, right? What are you doing by vying with the target you're supposed to guard."

"...ugh, that's true... but..."

As expected of the serious Ouka, after being reminded by the Captain (for the time being). It was quite a sound argument from Takeru.

"You too, Mari. It's fine if you're unwilling to be together with us. But don't provoke people too much. Also, if you want to go somewhere, just tell either of us."

"I-I don't really provoke anyone... I-I get it. I'll be nice and quiet."

Takeru was somehow quite relieved hearing that.

Seeing Mari's reaction who suddenly became obedient, Ouka gave a questioning look.

"Wait a moment...... Kusanagi...... why are you calling that woman by her first name...?"

"Mm? There's no deep meaning there. She said that's fine——"

Takeru simply tried to answer Ouka's question, that's when.

He was unexpectedly poked, as Mari suddenly clung to his arm while grinning and laughing.

"Th-that means, it's th-this kind of thing."

Mari's and Takeru's arms were crossed like lovers.

"W-ww-we are on terms like t-that so we call each other b-by first n-names, a-aren't we r-r-right?! Ta-Takeru〜〜?"

Although she pressed her glossy body towards him, she was stuttering as she spoke. The strong heartbeat that he felt from the valley of her small chest went *baku* *baku*, and her face was as red like an apple.

Why does she have to cling to him forcefully, the answer was simple. It was just to anger Ouka.

After seeing their hands intertwined Ouka's face twitched and she slowly drew close to Takeru.

"Kusanagi... you're a bastard like that after all! I'm disappointed with you! To think you would lose to the witch's temptation!"

"It's a misunderstanding! I'm just calling her by first name because it's easy to say!"

Denying his words frantically, Mari pressed her chest against him even further. Unexpectedly, Takeru felt a pleasant sensation with his arm.

"Jealousy? Isn't that unsightly——. Ah, right. Come to think of it, doesn't Takeru call you 'Ootori.'?"

"S-so what about it! I was called with my first name by him before too!"

"Heeee〜"

"I-in middle of battle... just once... however."

"Heeeee, fuun, is that sooooo, just once, pfftt hahaha."

Mari looked down on Ouka with a triumphant look on her face.

Ouka somehow felt like she lost, *guhhh* she growled.

What are those two fighting about now... Takeru had completely no idea.

"But I have a promise with Kusanagi! Kusanagi promised that he will walk together with me!"

"...wha-what's that about! Takeru, Did you make such a promise?! Or did you indirectly——"

"GAAAAH!! Don't involve me in your pointless quarreeelllllllllllllll!!"

In the first place, he didn't know what was up with their outrageous demands. His relationship with Ouka was that of comrades who trusted each other, and with Mari, they just went to the point of introducing themselves. He didn't raise any flags with either of them.

Honestly, he didn't want to be involved in those two's quarrel, which became an extended, pointless dispute neither of them wanted to lose no matter what.

Just as he thought that.

"Please give it a rest already——!!"

Suddenly, Usagi who was glaring at the leaflets she held stood up raising a loud voice.

It was so forceful, all platoon members focused their attention on her.

"...w-what is it, Usagi?"

Asked Takeru,

Usagi took a deep breath to calm herself down and, **glint**, she glared at Takeru.

"The thing we should be thinking about right now is neither getting along nor the way we call each other!"

She said, while being unusually serious. Takeru wondered why he was being unreasonably blamed for everything.

Ikaruga closed her BL novel, and lightly hit Usagi's head who was puffing her cheeks.

"Well then, what does Usagi-chan want to talk about——?"

"Don't! Call me! Usagi-chan! Obviously, it's about what Small Fry Platoon is going to do next."

"Next? Aren't we in the middle of an escort mission? Albeit unwillingly."

"There's something more important isn't there!"

While saying something like that about the mission the Chairman himself gave them, Usagi hit the desk.

"A month has passed ever since Ootori Ouka enlisted. Even though just a bit, but we've gotten some points. But the situation is still terrible."

Hearing Usagi's frank opinion, Ouka placed a hand on her chin and nodded remorsefully.

"Hmm... certainly, there was Kusanagi's hospitalization so we couldn't focus on platoon activities recently. I wasn't in a good condition either because of my injuries."

With that said, "Sorry.", Takeru apologized.

Usagi folded her arms, and soundly puffed her cheeks as she continued.

"The past is irrelevant! The problem is the future! At this rate, we might not be able to graduate!"

"Isn't that fine?"

"That's it! That way of thinking is the problem! We have to absolutely do our best starting tomorrow."

Usagi pointed at Ikaruga, and harshly criticized her.

"Got it?! We have no more time. I said this before, but it's all or nothing. We have to use appropriate measures!"

"? What measures? Do you have anything?"

In response to Ikaruga's question, "*Fufufun*", Usagi laughed fearlessly.

Then she lifted the flier she's been glaring at before and clapped her hands soundly.

"Please look at this."

After hearing her say so confidently, everyone including Mari looked at the leaflet.

Written with huge letters was "AntiMagic Academy's Mock Battle Tournament".

Under those words was written a time and date, the date written was tomorrow.

The three of them looked at each other, and suspiciously stared at Usagi again.

"""............what's that?"""

Usagi opened her eyes, making a face as if she couldn't believe it.

"A-are you guys really AntiMagic Academy's students?!"

"I knew about the tournament, but what does it have to do with our future?'

The mock battle tournament was a competition anyone could participate in that happened twice a year, in autumn and spring. The leagues were divided by grades, and platoons participated together. The platoon which won the championship could enter the national competition.

A general audience is allowed to watch it and it's very popular because of its extreme content. It draws a crowd every year.

"Fufufufu... look over here. Here."

Saying that, Usagi pointed at the tournament table.

First years. From left to right, 4th platoon, 2nd, 6th, 10th, 35th test platoon.

"""............"""

"I have taken it upon myself——and have entered us!"

"*Fufufun*", Usagi puffed her chest

"Did you know? Even if you don't advance to the national competition, if you pass the qualifications you can get 100 points all at once? And if you win at the national championship, you qualify for Inquisition unconditionally. Hey, wa-wa-wait a second! Why did all of you lose interest all of a sudden!?"

She noticed the other four stopped looking at her, and were eating their lunch.

Takeru who looked away and munched on his anpan said

"No. it's probably unrealistic to think we can win."

Ouka who also munched on her anpan,

"Mmm. I don't have confidence to win that together with you guys. Also, I hate that tournament. Outrageous, for combat techniques to be used as entertainment. Being a subject of gambling in the back... how deplorable."

Ikaruga, who wrapped yellow noodles that were heavily covered in mustard pasta around her fork,

"We will obviously lose, only doing normal platoon activities is still realistic. Also, why did you enter us without consulting us. Withdraw our application."

She crushed her hopes as she bit into the noodles.

And Lapis who sat next to Takeru——just stared at the milk bottle.

Usagi lost her motivation, and soundly sat down on her chair.

"T-this platoon is no good... fast... need to do something..."

"Such a unrealistic idea is rejected. Going steadily is the best."

Ouka told the depressed Usagi.

Usagi who was in a situation where she had no allies, suddenly looked at Mari. Wearing a bored expression, Mari was putting fried rice in her mouth as she noticed Usagi's gaze.

"...what is it."

"What about you? Do you have any suggestions on how to overcome the current situation?"

Usagi puffed her cheeks as she stabbed a knife into the hot cake and asked her.

"Why do I have to do something like that. It's your platoon, do something about it yourselves?"

"Y-you are also a student of AntiMagic Academy. You could cooperate a litt——"

As Usagi said that, **kachari*, Mari put a spoon on her dish.

"I think you're misunderstanding something. I have no obligation to cooperate with you guys."

"Wha... if we don't earn points we won't be able to graduate?! Is that still fine with you?! It's not an issue of being obligated to or not!"

"Something stupid like that doesn't matter to me. Because I'm getting special treatment as a witch. I don't have to participate in platoon activities, isn't that a new school rule?"

Certainly, just like Mari said, something like that was written.

"Hmph, it's unfair! Why are you getting special treatment just because you are a witch?!"

"Usagi... you are too loud."

Takeru cut in to stop her. Fortunately, the cafeteria was already noisy, and none of the students were paying attention to Small Fry Platoon.

"Do as you want. I have no intention of cooperating with you. It's unrelated to me."

She returned to her meal with an obnoxious attitude.

Then, Ouka who was eating her anpan closed her eyes.

"It's useless, Saionji. Don't expect advice from such a person."

"............"

"In the first place, she's using the fact that she's not human to get preferential treatment. Shouting stuff about equality, yet in fact seeking preferential treatment. There's no need to involve people like that."

"——I'm not using anything! It's the school rules that make it so!"

Mari hit the desk as she stood up, opposing Ouka's statement.

Ouka unfazed, just stared at Mari.

"It's the same thing. If you really want to join Inquisition, you should participate, even if you're told you don't have to. And you're accepting the pampering you get as a witch."

"There are things you shouldn't say...! You don't know what kind of treatment witches usually get...! Using my position? That's more like an insult!"

"If you think so, don't say 'Because I'm a witch' ever again. That's not language of a human who seeks equality."

Hearing Ouka's words, anger dwelling within Mari stirred.

"What, want to go at it? I don't really mind. I'm accustomed to fighting witches."

"...isn't that perfect..."

Because the situation was critical, Takeru was about to enter and stop them.

But, that's when.

"——Isn't that fine guys, just participate then."

Suddenly, someone grabbed Mari's shoulders from behind.

Lifting their faces, they saw a suspicious person.

A white haired man was standing behind Mari with a suspicious smile. Students fled as the Chairman entered the dining room, suddenly the whole cafeteria was empty and only Small Fry Platoon members remained.

Sougetsu who softly pressed Mari's shoulders greeted everyone.

"Oh-ho, seems like everyone is getting along well. Is everyone eating their lunch? I wonder if i can join!"

"Go away."

Hearing Ikaruga's frank reply, Sougetsu laughed.

"Your participation in the tournament is welcome as well. Deepen your youthful camaraderie. Mari-kun is also enlisted, isn't it the perfect chance to deepen your ties."

"? Is it fine for Mari to participate? The school rules..."

"Don't mind the rules. I'll overlook it. Temporarily, that is. She's one of our students after all."

"...can it be... that you heard our quarrel before?"

"I wasn't eavesdropping? Just happened to hear it. Also, the things Ouka said, and the things Mari said, I've thought of them before."

Sougetsu tapped Mari's shoulders with both hands.

"Sorry, I've made misleading school rules. I apologize as the chairman. In the board there's opposition to admitting witches. I had no choice but to incorporate it... I've already intended to revise it before. Leave the matter of school rules to me, don't hesitate and take part in the tournament together."

"...e-even if you say that..."

"Just because you're a witch, you won't be separated from your comrades."

Smiling gently, Sougetsu tapped Mari's shoulder again.

Takeru who was looking at him, had a strange feeling of discomfort as Sougetsu spoke.

After the platoon activities had ended, platoon members who had part time jobs left early. Takeru arrived at the shoe lockers.

He put his slippers in the locker room's shoe rack and sighed.

"...this is not good at all."

Platoon activities in the afternoon were a disaster.

They decided to train for the sake of tomorrow's tournament and headed towards the training grounds, but...

The result was the same as usual for Small Fry Platoon.

They were defeated by holograms set on low difficulty. First, Ikaruga's weapon broke. The moment Usagi fired, the gun had an extractor failure, the gun clattered loudly and the bullet exploded inside.

『"Nuahh!! Suginamiiiiiiiiiii!”』

『"Oopsie☆”』

Followed by Takeru who thought he was fighting one-on-one with a hologram, but somehow followed it to the place where another four were hiding.

Mari the newcomer, who was to support Ouka...

Had started a screaming match in the middle of cooperation, thus it ended with them shooting at each other.

『"Youu!! Betraying us after all!"』

『"That's unjust accusation! The one who shot first was you——!"』

It was just like their usual operations, his tears wouldn't come out anymore.

"Yeah... we can stop thinking we can win."

Clenching his fist, his pupils held a mysterious sense of mission as he left the locker room.

The day was coming to an end, a beautiful mix of orange and azure has spread.

Takeru was amazed by the beautiful twilight sky, then suddenly,

"——Kusanagiii!"

A threatening voice with a threatening sounded from the front.

In the school yard stained in orange, were several figures. They looked familiar to Takeru.

A leader-like male student brought five other students with him.

"Yoo Kusanagi...... you've got a really horrible expression today."

The boy floated a sarcastic smile as he hung a gun on his belt.

He was an acquaintance of his from middle school.

Kirigaya Kyouya, he was in the same class and had good results.

"Kyouya huh, it's been a while."

Even though Takeru said it in a way he would refer to a friend, and in relatively friendly way, the eye of the guy called Kyouya twitched and he clicked his tongue.

"...don't call me by my name, you blunt bastard."

He smiled in a haughty manner and shouldered an assault rifle.

"How's the condition of Small Fry Platoon? I've heard the rumors you've got an excellent helper? Makes me jealous."

"Well... it's hard in a way."

"I see. I see. Well it's impossible for you. Being a captain."

Kyouya laughed looking down on Takeru as if he was an ant on the roadside.

Takeru wasn't even slightly bothered.

"How's the 15th platoon? In the top three as usual?"

"Obviously iiidiot. I'm the captain, don't lump me together with you."

He wondered about it before, but where does this guy's confidence come from... Takeru was a bit jealous of that.

"Well, with a bastard like you who can only use a sword as a captain, the result is obvious. I sympathize with your members quite a bit."

Kyouya insulted Takeru. Also, he took out a piece of paper from his pocket.

"By the way, Kusanagi... looks like Small Fry Platoon has entered the tournament, am i seeing things? Ha?"

What Kyouya showed him was the print of the mock battle tournament Usagi showed them during the day.

"Ah... no, well, we're going to participate only once."

"Retards like you? The tournament? Hey guys, did you hear that?"

As Kyouya asked the question, the other five members of the platoon burst into laughter.

"You've really got guts! Your brain must've gone bad!"

"Shut up... I know that even if you don't tell me. I didn't intend to enter it either. Also, are those guys your members? You were hated before weren't you."

From his middle school days Ikaruga was also Kyouya's classmate and knows him.

Takeru mentioned Ikaruga's name causing Kyouya to become openly suspicious.

He looked nervously around checking if Ikaruga is around.

This guy is as bad with Ikaruga as usual...

It's been like that ever since middle school, this man called Kirigaya Kyouya was very weak against Ikaruga for some reason.

Also, Takeru didn't hate Kyouya. It was quite refreshing that he hated them so straightforwardly, it was easy to understand. And above all, he was the only boy who talked to him.

In a way, he was quite rare.

"............oh well! I won't stop you from participating in the tournament. By the way, do you know you bastard and 15th platoon meet in the second round?"

"Is that so? Sorry, didn't know that."

Saying that with a straight face, on Kyouya's temple blood vessels appeared. He didn't mean to offend him, but Takeru was famous for being unable to read the atmosphere. And to the extent he can't say anything to Ouka.

Kyouya was furious hearing Takeru's words, to the extent of almost hitting him. That's where,

"Ummmmmmm, let's leave it at that, right, captain?"

A female member of 15th platoon interrupted Kyouya and Takeru. That girl is in charge of health for the 15th platoon.

Her name was Yoshimizu Akira. A girl hoping to join Seelie, she didn't look like anything special, but she always stopped fights between Kyouya and Takeru.

Clicking his tongue Kyouya lowered his shoulders.

"Second round, look forward to it Kusanagi...!"

Kyouya said that strange line and left. His figure from the back looked like a thug's.

Even so, Kyouya was quite talented. He wasn't particularly outstanding at anything, but his performance was good enough to be called almighty. Same as Usagi, the type to work diligently in secret. The fact that his members followed him despite his overbearing personality proved he was excellent.

Akira apologized to Takeru while clasping both of her hands

"Mm—— sorry, Kusanagi-kun. Captain is in a bad mood today."

"It's the same as usual, I'm not really bothered... why is he in a bad mood today, did something happen?"

Takeru asked, Akira gave a sad smile and scratched her head.

"No, just before, one of our members quit."

"Can it be, after the terrorism last month...?"

"No, at that time we weren't in school. It's an unrelated matter, it's a result of violating rules, he charged head on against a witch and got done in. We tried to stop him but he didn't listen to us..."

"...is that so."

"Captain was also bothered. He was too reckless. It's not good to be reckless after all. Going steady is the best～"

Akira made a brave smile, Takeru also smiled.

She's a good girl, that's what he thought. She was definitely the mood maker of 15th platoon. Laughing without a care at times like this... she must have a hard time.

"Well Captain already said it, looking forward to meet you in two days. There will be no mercy for you, we'll go at full force."

"...r-right. Well before that happens, getting through first round might be a problem."

"Come on—— You'll pass through someone as weak as that——"

She hit his back, causing Takeru to give a wry smile.

Akira said "I wish you luck in battle!" and saluted before leaving Takeru.

"...she's a good girl."

Takeru narrowed his eyes and muttered heartily.

It would be good to have a girl like that with us... if that were the case she would heal him up... he got to the school gate while thinking like that.

"...Takeru."

Suddenly, his name was called out.

Next to the stone pillar with the school's nameplate on it, a silhouette with a muffler wrapped around her neck.

"Mari? Didn't you go back early?"

"...I was waiting."

She held a student bag, Mari's moderate figure was strangely graceful and girly causing him to skip a beat.

Mari lively closed in on Takeru, and looked up at him as she bent her waist down.

"Let's go home together."

With a deadly smile, causing Takeru to almost stop thinking.

What's this. His heart was pounding really hard. He had a bittersweet feeling.

Twilight. Going home from school. Hustle and bustle in the distance. Autumn wind stroking his cheek.

Let's go back together. Just by being told that, his youth obtained something unexpected...

"I-I don't really mind... which direction are you going? Our directions might be different."

He blundered and scratched his cheek almost blurting out the fact that he can't read the mood. Calm down, calm down. me, he repeated to himself.

Perhaps because of the setting sun and the current situation, but Mari looked strangely cute.

"What are you talking about? Isn't it obvious we're going the same way."

"I-is that right?"

"That's right, because."

Mari turned back with a twirl, and only faced her head his way.

"Because I'm going to Takeru's house now."

Her hair and the scarf fluttered on the wind. She looked godly, Takeru was astounded.

Takeru was in shock and was about to answer to her invitation,

———*kachin*

Suddenly, someone grabbed the head.

Not Takeru's. But Mari's head.

"It hurts! Wha- what are you doing!"

"You, why don't you explain, why are you tempting Kusanagi......!"

It was Ouka. While her body emitted a red aura, she decided to iron claw Mari's head from behind.

"What is it! I'm just teasing him a little! There are often situations like this in manga!"

"Don't lie. Magical power must be leaking from somewhere without doubt. A seduction magic... I can't leave Kusanagi alone with someone as lascivious as you......!"

"L-lascivious?! I didn't use any magic! No matter how you slice it, it was a healthy approach, no?!"

"Shut up. Kusanagi is a hidden pervert so he's in danger even with this much charm."

"This much? Did you say 'this much'?! Who do you think you are!"

Forgetting about Takeru, Mari and Ouka started bickering again.

Why is the affinity of those two so bad. Takeru felt that whether it's a normal person or a witch, such a thing shouldn't matter to relations. And more than anything, he was shocked that he was already certified as a closet pervert.

* * *

When Takeru and the others finished the platoon activities, and went back home with Mari and Ouka.

Relic Eater, Lapis Lazuli walked alone through the school.

No one else was around. The location was by the incinerator behind the school.

Lapis's azure-colored hair released a faint magic.

《”Scanning started. Magic reaction's around the school——none."》

She was currently detecting magic in the vicinity. She wasn't too good at it, but as a Magical Heritage she could search just by herself.

《"Shifting to wide-area scanning. Constructing FM pit——diffusing."》

She discharged magic particles dwelling within her.

At the same time, azure light like fireflies appeared in Lapis's vicinity, and momentarily spread.

One by one particles are racing through the academy, looking for sources of magic power.

All of the information sensed by the particles flowed back to Lapis' body.

《"Forbidden area, tower with sealed Magical heritage none——school's gymnasium none——No reaction. Teacher's building——target practice field——combat training grounds——no reaction from either of them. Schoolyard and first year lockers——"》

The moment one of the particles was close to the colosseum, Lapis blinked.

《"Detecting a small amount of magic——. Converging all pits, focusing scan on one point."》

Ordered by Lapis, diffused particles gathered in the schoolyard and locker room.

The gathered particles spread out in the air again. They rose up in the air from the schoolyard, and ran through the gate.

《"...the reaction is lost. Exploring thermal reaction———Schoolyard, ten general students, 15th platoon's members, Kusanagi Takeru, Ootori Ouka, Nikaido Mari, Inquisition's "Dullahan" - two people——Commencing face recognition operation with campus database——No authentication problems observed. Leading the pit, there is a possibility of false positives and naturally occurring magic——perceived information is within margin of error. Adopting. Threat not recognized. Ending scan."》

Lapis indifferently finished probing the school grounds and abolished the diffused particles ending the day like that.

* * *

On the ground of a downtown street, writing a magical circle on the ground with his leg Haunted wiped sweat exaggeratedly.

"That was dangerous. Not bad, that azure-colored girl. It was found immediately even though it was connected only for a short time."

《"I don't like it. That wasn't a level of magic leakage that can be normally sensed, I've a hunch, a suspicion. She was like a machine, disgusting."》

Haunted stood up and laughed passionately.

"That girl is good. She has sharp intuition for something inorganic. I want her a bit."

《"…………"》

"Is it jealousy? Nacht!"

《"I'll slaughter you."》

Sensing murderous intent from Nacht, Haunted was all smiles.

"However, the guard is firm indeed. Not just the test platoon, Dullahans disguised with optical camouflage always sticking to them. I hoped for some luck, because I wanted to avoid dealing with Kurogane Hayato."

As Haunted mouthed Kurogane Hayato's name, a Dullahan's, Nacht let out a displeased aura.

《"...Kurogane... that guy."》

"When it comes to people I don't want to fight with ever again, that guy is a prime example. He's a formidable foe, an opponent that's no fun fighting against."

Completing his evaluation, Haunted placed a hand on his chin.

《"From the front you'll get caught right away. They brought Mari out of the taboo area all the way to where students are on purpose, I wonder if they are underestimating you."》

"If I can, I want to aim at the moment when the guard is as thin as possible..."

Hmmm, Haunted continued to think, troubled.

However, after thinking for a moment, with insane half closed eyes, he suddenly laughed.

"——Let's make it flashy. Yeah, yeah, we'll do that, such a plan will be good."

Extremely happy, he repeated it many times.

《"Didn't you intend to do that from the beginning... It's not that I don't trust you, you excel at laying traps and interference, ambush or infiltration would be good, but you're weak when it comes to head on attack right? What will you do if it becomes a battle?"》

"I'm not weak, I just hate it, it's barbarous."

《"I think being barbarous is better than being tasteless."》

Nacht spoke her opinion loudly, Haunted narrowed his eyes with confidence.

"I hate attack magic, that's why I need you right?"

Being told she's needed, Nacht fell silent.

《"It can't be helped."》

Hearing Nacht's embarrassed voice, Haunted laughed disgustingly.

"The timing of the attack will be... during the flashy mock battle tournament. Looks like Mari is participating as well."

《"No matter how you look at it, it's a trap."》

"Choosing between a trap, or a decoy. What to do. I want it to be flashy... I don't have time to prepare corpse eating demons this time, and don't even have time to call a Hero..."

Haunted wondered about the nasty plan. cheerfully like a kid.

"Hmm, I hope that person will cooperate."

《"Aah, that regular customer?"》

"It's a give-and-take relationship. The client has lots of Mari-san's information from the other side, cooperation is inevitable."

Haunted looked in his priestly clothing's sleeves, and took out a square machine.

It was a mobile phone, unbefitting a witch.

He cleared his throat twice, and pushed a button.

"——Oh, is that miss Alchemist? Ah, I am, my name is Haunted from Valhalla～. Thank you very much for the last time～. Yes... yes indeed——. Sorry to trouble you, but could you connect to the development department? I want to ask you to show off the new prototype of Dragoon at AntiMagic Academy's mock battle tournament, it's a very urgent matter and I want it done as soon as possible."

Haunted made an incredibly good salesman smile as he left the town's back alley.

Chapter 4 - Mock Battle Tournament

Mari returned together with Ouka. Five minutes later.

"Stay in my house?! Why?!"

Takeru yelled, after hearing the circumstances from the two of them.

"Because of mishandled procedures, there are no free rooms in the girl's dormitory. Also, knowing that Nikaido Mari is wearing a Gleipnir, going outside school grounds is fine... at least the Chairman said so."

Ouka explained dissatisfied. But at the same time, she wasn't too convincing.

"So why does it have to be my room?"

"Saionji is living with her parents and there's nowhere to sleep at Suginami's. This woman didn't want to come to my room. Of course I don't want her in there either."

"...you're getting along way too badly; the two of you."

"Don't worry Kusanagi, I won't leave you alone with this witch. I'll accompany and monitor you to make sure you won't get attacked."

"I won't attack him!"

Mari retorted, as she walked up from the left side.

While being a bit nervous, Takeru looked at Ouka.

"Ootori, are you... going to stay in my house too?"

"...is that bad?"

Ouka asked, while feeling a little uneasy.

"...i-it's not bad! Definitely not!"

"Mmm. Well, sorry to intrude then. Don't worry, I brought a sleeping bag with me."

He finally found out what was in the huge boston bag Ouka brought with her.

"Oh well, I'm not going to stop you... I'm quite poor so it's really small?"

"It's fine, I already knew that you're poor and prepared myself."

...the fact that she's going to move in was decided just a moment ago, so why did she have that kind of information.

Takeru's mood turned a bit sad.

"Kusanagi is living alone... is it an apartment?"

"Yeah. Six and a half tatami mats, with a kitchen and a bath."

"? Isn't that quite normal, it's not that bad of a place... by the way, how much is the rent?"

Hearing Ouka, Takeru raised five fingers.

"...fifty thousand? That's quite normal rent."

"...no, five thousand."

""Five thousand?!""

It's too low no matter how you look at it, is what the two of them thought.

Seeing them surprised, Takeru looked quite proud.

"Fufufu, a good deal ain't it? I finally found it after looking everywhere over and over again for a week."

"Umm... isn't it unusually cheap when compared with the other rooms?"

Mari asked.

"? Yeah, now that you say it, the other rooms were about sixty thousand weren't they."

I wonder why? Takeru tilted his neck thinking that.

Mari made a crooked smile. Ouka's face turned extremely pale, and she fell silent.

"You, that's... definitely dangerous. It's definitely a room a suicide occurred in, or maybe a poltergeist appears in it."

"Hahaha! There's no such thing. You've watched too much horror movies. Things like ghosts won't appear unless you use evocation magic."

Takeru laughed off Mari's imaginative fears.

Mari followed Takeru while still being a bit anxious. Ouka didn't speak a thing ever since she heard the rent was only five thousand, she trudged a bit behind while looking towards the ground.

"We're here. This is my place."

The two looked in the direction Takeru pointed at.

There, at first glance it looked like ordinary apartment. It's overall appearance was pretty normal. One part only; one of the rooms. The innermost room on the second floor looked weird.

———*wooooooooooo—gyaa!!* *gyaaa!!* *creaak...* *creaak...*

It's aura was emitting an ominous sound, birds that sat on the roof let out creaking voices. Despite no one being inside, a creaking sound could be heard coming from inside the room.

"——Isn't this definitely dangerous!?"

"What is?"

"What is that black aura?! Isn't it giving out a horrible "wooooooo" ringing!?"

"Isn't that the ventilation fan next door?"

"And those birds going *gyaa**gyaa*?!”

"That's a crow. Because they feast on garbage. The neighbors act annoyed lately too."

"Crows don't have scales like that?! Also, there's no one inside yet you can hear creaking sounds, what is that!"

"The rattling in this house is pretty horrible."

Takeru explained embarrassed.

Mari looked at Takeru with astounded eyes , "What kind of nerves do you have..." she muttered,

"? Ootori, what is it? Why are you standing there? Come over here."

Ouka noticed what Takeru was pointing at and stopped in the back. Being called she turned around, her movement seemed to give out creaking and squeaking sounds.

"Wassit, wassizit?"

"...what's up with the slang?"

"There' ain' nothing like dat. All's 'fine. I ain't scared 't all!"

Looking at her, she was trembling and her teeth were chattering. Even though Takeru who was pretty dense didn't notice it, Mari who was pretty sharp understood Ouka's reaction right away, she smiled maliciously.

At the same time, she clung to Takeru's arm tightly.

"You can go back if it's scary? I don't really mind, I'll stay here alone with Takeru."

"Guh....!"

"But, for a honor student like you to be scared of ghosts——. That's really unexpected——"

"Y-you! What are you talking about! I... this much is... n-n-nothing to me!"

Saying that, Ouka started walking towards the apartment confidently.

"....uuu——...! Uuu〜...!"

Seeing Ouka trembling and unsteady unable to climb the apartment stairs, Mari laughed happily.

"Pufufu, don't try the impossible. Go back if it's scary, come on, go back."

"...I don't get it, but are both of you going to stay in my room? Or is it just Mari? Which is it?"

Takeru asked Mari while checking his watch.

Mari was surprised for a moment, she thought calmly for a moment while placing a hand on her chin.

Without Ouka. Alone with Takeru. Sleeping alone with a boy. Mari's face reddened slightly.

"N-no... that's a bit... w-what to do? I-I don't have any experience... w-we aren't going out yet... suddenly such a thing, it's a bit..."

"? Though I don't really get it, but Mari is staying right. Go in then, come on."

Takeru took something out from his pocket, and handed it to Mari.

"...key? Why?"

"Make yourself at home. If you want to eat, there's a supermarket if you turn right in that alley, also, you will find the kitchen and bath easily... if you don't want to use my bath towel, you can buy one at the supermarket. Do you have money?"

"Wa-wait a minute. Why? Am I supposed to stay here alone? What about you? Isn't this your place?"

"I've got a part time job. I won't be back until 2 o'clock after midnight, so you can go to sleep and don't mind me."

"Part time job?! Until 2 o'clock... are you fine with that kind of lifestyle? Is your body alright?"

"My body is quite sturdy because of swordsmanship. I'm quite used to it."

Takeru said so with a faint smile.

He was a self-supporting student. He needed money to repay his household's debt and for the sake of his little sister. The reason he entered Inquisition was because of the money in the first place.

Takeru checked his watch impatient and looked back.

"Sorry, I'll be late. Use my room as you see fit!"

Takeru ran off while waving. Mari was left where she stood unmoving.

"…………"

After listening to their conversation Ouka started walking back.

That's when Mari grabbed her shoulder strongly.

"Wh-what is it… I'm going back just like you told me to, let go."

"D…don't leave me alone."

Mari clung to Ouka with her eyes full of tears. Ouka's eyes were teary as well.

"It's a mission right, you have to guard me properly!"

"Why are you saying that only at a time like this! I want to get away from this place as soon as possible!"

"I don't want to stay in a place like this either! But I have no choice other than staying here because I was given the key!"

"Then stay here alone! I-I'm g-going back!"

"You're heartless! I definitely won't let you run away!"

"Let! Me! Go!"

The two of them made a ruckus under the twilight sky.

But in the end, both of them stayed together in Takeru's home.

* * *

Takeru said farewell to Mari and Ouka and left for his part time job.

The strategy of using Nikaido Mari as a bait ran behind the scenes.

A single truck was parked in front of Takeru's apartment.

Inside of that truck were strategic headquarters. A large amount of monitors were lined up in the dim space, and firearms were hung on the wall.

There were several people typing on the computers, a man who seemed like an Inquisitor looked over it and stared at a monitor with a serious expression.

《 "This is Banshee's first monitoring unit. One of our members collided with a bystander. Fortunately he wasn't noticed thanks to optical camouflage. We're continuing our monitoring."》

"Continuing what. Exclude that guy from the mission immediately. Get rid of that useless guy."

《"...yes sir!! My apologies!"》

After instructing Banshee corps, Kurogane Hayato removed the microphone from in front of his face.

Next to Hayato who was staring at the monitor was his subordinate, another member of Dullahan who approached him with two cups of coffee.

"You let them out of the school on purpose, but it doesn't seem like they're attacking... The Valhalla."

The woman put a cup of coffee in front of Hayato and murmured quietly.

"Don't let your guard down. Be prepared to return fire at any time."

Hayato told the woman without removing his eyes from the monitor.

"Aren't you a little too nervous? Valhalla won't necessarily act here. I wonder if it's necessary to be this cautious."

"...You, you're a the newbie who was admitted to Dullahan from Banshee, right? Have you confronted Valhalla yet?"

"? No, I haven't yet."

The black haired woman lined up next to Hayato after putting documents on the desk.

"Don't underestimate them. They can use methods beyond our imagination to kill the target."

"...is that so, but maybe they will leave her..."

Hayato answered the unconvinced woman without moving his eyes from the front.

"Do you know why humans were able to win the Witch Hunt War?"

"...because guns were stronger than magic?"

"Wrong. There were few reasons. We had an overwhelming numeric advantage. Guns were merely the only way we could compete with these guys. Just like we used our military force, they produced wisdom and strength as well."

"But, that was 150 years ago? In modern times, the power of the witches has declined. Certainly, a witch has strength equal to a tank, but that's the extent of it."

"The monsters you speak of from 150 years ago, just think that their remnants constitute current Valhalla."

Saying that to the woman, Hayato dropped his line of sight towards the documents.

"A report from Mistilteinn?"

"It's from 20 minutes ago. There were no abnormalities."

"Did you run background checks on the students who were with Kusanagi Takeru? It was the guys who were present at the capture of Nikaido Mari."

"Yes. Kirigaya Kyouya, Yoshimizu Akira, Kitakami Heiji, Ishibashi Shinya, Mizuhara Ai, There was a recent issue with them. They have been punished the other day. It seems like they were depressed after they lost one person, but they seem to be acting as usual."

"Continue being vigilant."

The woman left after being given an order.

Hayato who was left behind, stared at the monitor and lamented the fact that the current Inquisition lacked a sense of danger.

"All members brace yourselves. Don't think that the enemy won't attack. Move while assuming the worst. Got it?"

《"""——Roger!"""》

Even after hearing a reliable reply he couldn't stop worrying.

Kurogane Hayato was one of the few Dullahans who knew how dreadful Valhalla was.

At 2 o'clock after midnight. Takeru finished his part time job at the convenience store and returned to his apartment while walking quietly.

After failing worse than usual and getting scolded by the manager Takeru's spirit was at it's limit. For Takeru who couldn't do anything except for swordsmanship, having work was simply a torture. If he lost concentration even for a single moment the order was going to fail, so his nerves wore out five times faster than a normal person's.

"Haa... living is difficult."

While saying the words too heavy for high school students as if he was spitting blood, he headed to the innermost room.

While looking at details of water and electricity bills that have been placed in the post, he opened the door.

"I'm back～" he muttered to himself; took off his shoes and opened the sliding door like usual.

""............wha.""

His eyes met with Mari's.

Because he came back home like usual, he forgot that Mari was staying over.

What he had seen, was burned into him. Mari seemed to have taken a bath and was wiping her hair with a bath towel. She wasn't wearing anything.

She had a slender but feminine body, reddish skin, and wet hair.

And above all else, those very modest... still in the middle of growing (or so they seemed) two bulges. The moment he saw it, the sound of his heart roared in his chest.

"N-no... t-t-this is, umm."

"......〜〜〜〜"

This is bad. He's going to be beaten up. Thinking normally there's no way he won't be beaten up.

Thinking that, Takeru braced himself ready to eject and escape at any time.

"...y-you're q-quite early..."

Mari hid her body with a towel quickly, she lowered her face and looked up at him shyly as she said that.

He wasn't beaten up after bumping into her in the bath. But if he wasn't beaten, how should he respond. It couldn't be helped that he was embarrassed.

"U-umm..."

"......"

"C-can... can you g-go out. This is quite... embarrassing."

Averting her faintly wet eyes, Mari——

"Don't... stare that much... I don't have confidence."

Hearing such a thing, these killer words and that gesture. Takeru's face turned crimson.

In the super awkward atmosphere, Takeru took a few steps back to leave the room.

At that moment,

"——Kyaaaaaaaa."

The scream that suddenly resounded loudly, was not Mari's.

As he wondered what's going on the bathroom's door opened vigorously and a woman jumped out like a wet animal.

She came. It was Ouka. She jumped out of the bath with teary eyes and crashed into Mari who was in the front causing both of them to collapse.

"Bah...! What are you——hyaa!"

"?! Wait, don't come over here idi——guh!"

The two of them entangled and fell in Takeru's direction, the three crashed in front of the entrance. Takeru fell down in a way that made him face the two naked girls.

As dust rose up faintly, Mari's face displayed fury.

"Hey you...! What's up with you jumping out of the bath suddenly!"

"I-i-it, it came out! G-g-gh-ghost...! A-a woman with long hair... from the bathtub!"

Ouka was shaking with a blue face as she held onto Mari and Takeru. Mari looked with an amazed face at Ouka who was unexpectedly trembling.

In that situation,

"Uh... umm....... this, this it not my fault right? It's definitely not my fault right?"

Mari and Ouka noticed Takeru under their chests.

Because Takeru held out both of his hands trying to stop them as they collapsed, his left hand grasped Mari's breast, while his right grasped Ouka's breast.

It was a really contrasting feeling to him, it was **funifuni** in his left hand, and **munimuni** in his right.

The feeling was about the same, but Takeru could not afford to enjoy this bliss.

The two of them noticed their chests were groped, and stared at Takeru. Being stared at, his face turned red in no time and he made a crooked smile as he prayed to god...

As expected, he was beaten up by the two of them this time.

"Fuu..."

After he properly took a shower, when he opened the door to the changing room, Ouka was already sleeping soundly in her sleeping bag.

Since the spiritual phenomena subsided as Takeru came back, she fell asleep as if her strings were cut.

Ouka was bad at handling ghosts, it was surprising that she had such an aspect to her.

And Mari was sitting on the edge of an open window, gloomily staring somewhere outside.

Although she bought fresh underwear at the supermarket, she didn't have any clothes, so she borrowed Takeru's shirt.

Because the size didn't fit, the white shirt was too long and loose, it looked as if she wasn't wearing anything which was strangely sensational.

Takeru was still troubled and his eyes were unfocused, he took out two plastic bottles from the refrigerator and threw one to Mari.

"...danke."

Mari smiled thinly and said her thanks.

Takeru sat down on the mat by the window and brought the plastic bottle to his lips and looked at Mari as she was illuminated by the moonlight.

"So... how was it? The first day at our school."

"...well, it wasn't anything special. It was tiring. The level of the class is low. And I was made to do unreasonable physical exercises, how barbarous! Only bad things came out of it."

Pouting her lips, Mari started to complain.

"Then, what about the Small Fry Platoon? Feeling you can get used to it?"

Takeru asked. Mari narrowed her eyes in response and faced down.

"......I wouldn't know such a thing."

Hearing a neither negative nor positive answer, Takeru made a bitter smile.

"But, you and Ootori, somehow get along don't you?"

"Haa? Where did you see that? We're hopelessly incompatible."

Seeing her denying it annoyed, Takeru chuckled.

"Well, you don't have to rush. Even if it's a test run, you know that you will be attending officially once it's fully adopted, right?"

Hearing Takeru's question, Mari fell silent.

"I'm not bothered at all by the fact that you're a witch, if you ever wondered about it. The others aren't people who would either."

"..........."

"Ootori is the same. Her hate is directed towards criminals, not the witches. You think what I'm saying is strange right? If she really thought you were evil, she wouldn't quarrel with you head on like that."

"…………"

"Usagi and Suginami too, they will treat you normally after speaking with you a bit. After all, I got used to it the same way."

"…………"

"They are picky fellows, if the time passes they will surely——"

"——Stop it."

Suddenly being interrupted strongly, Takeru looked at Mari in surprise.

"Please... stop talking about that..."

As if, Mari said that with a face as if she was putting up with something.

"Sorry. You're getting a bit too familiar. You're like a poison to me... causing me to drop my guard. You're scary, Takeru."

"W-what are you saying?"

"I am a witch. You are a human. The worlds we live in are just too different."

"...you say such things suddenly, what happened."

She had a headache, and placed a hand on her forehead while closing her eyes.

"I don't know... but I... am not the person you think I am."

Mari's face was blue because of the headache, her eyes were devoid of light.

"I still... don't really remember, but that's the feeling I have..."

"You can't remember... what are you talking about?"

"I will... definitely hurt you."

Mari averted her faintly wet eyes that were staring directly at Takeru and she stood up.

"Sorry... forget I said anything. I'm going to sleep. You should go too, morning will come soon."

Mari sunk into the futon without looking back.

"......good night, Takeru."

Mari faced away from him as she slept.

Still stunned, Takeru heard both Ouka and Mari's breathing as they slept.

He glanced outside, the sky started to light up as it was almost dawn. But pain surged through Takeru's head as he recalled something from his memory. But inside of Takeru's heart was nowhere as bright and easygoing as the dawn sky was.

Mari firmly rolled up in a futon, and looked towards Takeru's back.

Why did I suddenly... such a thing...

She frowned as her head still throbbed with pain.

Pain surged every few seconds, as if her mind was remembering something.

Every time the pain surged, she saw a strange video like a flashback.

Video transferred bits and pieces of something to her. Flames, burning. Corpses rising.

In the video that surging through her head, Mari faced towards him.

『"Magic is——it exists to make people happy."』

Mixing with the video, a voice echoed in her head. The voice was also very nostalgic, a cruel voice deep from Mari's heart.

What is this... is this my memory...?!

Even without knowing the meaning of the recollection, her body began to tremble. Not knowing why was it scary, her teeth started chattering.

『"...Ma...ma."』

A strangely pale baby, a voice calling her mother.

That voice sounded like it blamed Mari for some reason.

You are not qualified to live a normal life. You are a witch. Be crushed by sin.

The numerous invisible things looked down on her scornfully.

Mari rolled her eyes and hugged her own body.

She remembered a piece of her memory, but despite not knowing who she is, she felt like she didn't want to remember it.

Is that something that can be forgiven...? Not remembering anything, acting familiar with Takeru and the others, can that really be forgiven?

Mari couldn't get rid of the discomfort she was in no matter what she did.

195th AntiMagic Academy's mock battle tournament.

The annual competition that was carried out in two batches every year preliminaries and the main competition. They are divided into three leagues from first years to third years. it's a competition in which test platoons fight mock battles against each other.

Sniper rifles, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, everyone chooses only one gun, and the bullets used are paint bullets. There is a limited number of bullets. No friendly fire. Lethal close combat weapons are prohibited, a plastic knife covered in paint is to be used. Knockout via martial arts is allowed. Hitting the enemy gun's barrel is allowed. The possibility of injuries is still considerable.

Competition takes place over a period of one week, 100 points for the promotion is given to platoons that win qualifications, and the winner of the national competition is unconditionally admitted into Inquisition.

Ten minutes a match. First year fight in a team deathmatch style.

Objects on the field change every year. The field's interior of the 195th competition was something that mimicked urban warfare.

"Ahh......shit......!"

swish* *swish, Takeru had to move while hiding behind the rubble as the flurry of paint bullets was sent his way.

First years qualifications; first round. 10th Test Platoon vs 35th Test Platoon.

After the match started, Small Fry Platoon's positions fell apart right away and scattered as the enemy carried out a splendid surgical operation.

Because the enemy placed two people on top of an unused church's bell tower, Takeru couldn't move carelessly around the fountain square he was on.

"Usagi, can't you fire from there somehow?"

《"I-It's in a blind spot... a-a little bit... need to move a little bit further."》

Usagi's voice could be heard over the intercom.

It was the worst possible situation for Usagi. A big audience and her appearance being displayed on the monitor resulted in a stage fright on a catastrophic level. On top of it, she had to take down two of the enemy vanguards before they could advance.

While she was good at long range shooting, mid to short distance wasn't her specialty.

The enemy for the sake of sealing the sniper's actions rushed to her position at full speed and hid themselves.

《"Uu...uuu〜〜〜, Ku-Kusanagii〜〜〜, help mee〜〜〜."》

"Don't cry... I'm in a situation where I want to cry as well."

He calmed Usagi down while smiling wryly.

"Ootori, how is it?"

《"I got rid of the two occupying the position."》

"Ooh, as expected of you."

《"It's not time for praises, idiot. To save Saionji I need to pass through the fountain square no matter what. I can't hit the two at the bell tower... damn it, if it weren't only one weapon a person, I would have taken down that sniper."》

If Ouka had an assault rifle so she could snipe the enemy from medium distance only, only sniper rifles had pyrotechnical paint bullets, assault rifle's paint bullets were too fragile to be used at big distances.

"...Mari, how about you?"

Timidly, he checked on Mari's status.

After a few seconds, response from Mari came.

《"...I told you before we started, did you forget already?"》

She replied coldly causing Takeru to fall silent.

He thought about the words she told them before the match, when all of them were gathered.

『"I will definitely not help you in any way, if you want to do something, do it on your own."』 she said sharply.

Members looked at each other, and everyone reacted differently. Ouka only snorted and spit with a grumpy face, Usagi angrily said "No need to tell us, we didn't expect anything from you." . Ikaruga just raised her arms accepting it and Takeru just felt very disappointed.

It seemed thinking that even though she couldn't open her heart, that she would be able to open to them in her own way was apparently a misunderstanding.

Mari seemed to avoid developing permanent relations with them.

Maybe one day wasn't enough for her to get close to them. Maybe they said something they shouldn't.

No good... I need to concentrate on the mock battle now.

He shook his head and switched his feelings.

Takeru couldn't think of a way to break through, the communication with Ouka also fell silent.

This is no good... I didn't expect us to win, in the first place we weren't supposed to participate but... somehow.

While hiding his body behind the object, and playing with the plastic knife in his hand, he mumbled complaining,

"Even so, it's a bit shameful..."

《"I also want to capitalize on that feeling... but I'm not someone who acts high and mighty yet is unable to accomplish anything."》

《"Uuu〜〜〜!! I-it's still not over is right?!"》

《"If we were to know about it earlier, we would be able to think of more strategy and measures. If I had time, I could develop dedicated weapons for this."》

It seems like they all felt similar.

Despite already knowing that they would lose, everyone still wanted to challenge it and win. Even if they were the weakest of their grade, a group called 'small fries'.

Wait for a time-out, or perform a suicide attack.

There were only two options to choose from.

...but then, suddenly, a harsh voice coming from the intercom made them focus once again.

《"Hey, Small Fry Platoon! If you don't come out this game won't end! You can't keep hiding forever!"》

《"Ha ha ha, what did you guys think by entering the tournament! Or did you just want to disgrace yourself? What, you masochists, just come out and let yourselves be headshotted with a machine gun——"》

Their communication was interrupted by their opponents, the 10th platoon.

That was a so called taunt. It ended up with provocations since they just stood there. It may seem vulgar, but skills like these can be very useful in the mock battle tournament.

Small Fry Platoon... had a lot of pride despite not having any results, really, a lot.

《""""............""""》

"...h-hey, folks, can you endure that? A chance might come if we wait, we shouldn't kamikaze atta——"

Takeru tried to calm everyone down.

But right after he told everyone that, another remark came from enemy—.

《"Mr. Captain——! Please show me some of your cool swordsmanship——! After all it's only cool and can't really do anything can it——."》

《"It's a divine retribution -degozaru! He's a royal retainer -degozaru! It's a raid -degozaru!"》

《"Seriously, something like a sword is useless! It's just a disgusting and outdated; an antique——!"》

Any expression vanished from Takeru's face.

《"Ku-Kusanagi? Did you... again...?"》

"It's all right. It's okay. I didn't snap. I didn't snap yet."

It was only his mouth that laughed, his eyes were wide open.

That pair of eyes were like an animal's shining in the darkness of the night.

"It's all right... fufufu I'm calm. I won't go for a kill head on. I'll just evade. Just gonna avoid getting hit. But, just a little wouldn't——"

《"""............"""》

"——I think beating the hell out of them should be OK."

Takeru already completely entered berserk mode.

Ouka was slightly taken aback by Takeru's sudden change, the other two weren't surprised at all.

《"I didn't think a day where I approve of Kusanagi going out of control will come. After that annoying provocation I lost my patience."》

《"It's fine just this once. If your body hurts after this onee-san will massage it for you——go at them with full force, crush them."》

Takeru stood up after being pardoned by the two of them.

"Listen folks... we're deeeefinitely winning this."

While still looking like a demon, he squeezed the handle of his blade.

"...Ootori."

"?! What is it?"

"I'll be the decoy and buy some time, clean up the two weaklings near Usagi."

"I-is that okay? Doesn't your swordsmanship put a tremendous burden on your body?"

"It's fine. Believe in me."

Hearing Takeru speak in an unusually strong manner, Ouka gasped.

Takeru pulled his plastic blade as he spoke to Ouka,

"Run."

《"R-roger!"》

Just as she was told to, Ouka started running and exposed her body out in the open at the fountain square.

At the same time, Takeru slowly moved from behind the object.

《"——Fools! You cheap bastards!"》

The sniper's muzzle shined in the bell tower, a dry sound of a gunshot rang.

The paint bullet flew straight towards Takeru and——it was bisected into two in mid-air.

《"...wha——"》

The puzzled reaction of the sniper could be heard through the intercom.

He checked through the scope, but bullet didn't reach Takeru.

What he saw instead, was a demon slowly walking towards the bell tower.

He gave off an illusion as if his fighting spirit emitted a red, growling aura. His eyes were wide open, and his mouth twisted into a wolf-like expression as he held his shiny blade.

《"H-hiiiiiiiii!!"》

The sniper instinctively screamed.

Takeru looked like a terrifying monster to him.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style initiate, Kusanagi Takeru. When I protect myself like this——don't think any of it will reach, you insects."

In fact, he was like some sort of demon, he was pointlessly riled up.

《"S-shoot! Shoot himm——!"》

《"Don't hesitate! Don't go easy on him! Capitalize on that pea shooter's performance and shoot till he's dead——!"》

《"Bullet's don't reach him! D-don't come over here, don't come don't come don't come!!!"》

《"Ahahahaha! This is fun! Isn't it?! Isn't it fun?! Ahahahaha!"》

Mari was sitting on a rubble at the starting point with a delicate expression, as she heard the noise and Ikaruga's joyful, full of herself voice from the intercom.

《"It looks wonderful. I didn't think you had a split personality."》

《"I-is that Kusanagi's real self?"》

《"It used to be... this, a lot of this also comes from everyday life's frustration... wouldn't you feel sorry for him if we didn't let him do this?"》

《"So that's the problem?"》

《"But, at times like this it won't last long. Ootori, you hurry up too. It's about time he breaks down."》

《"Breaks down?"》

A question mark floated above Ouka's head, and immediately after that.

《"——Ghaan!"》

Suddenly, Takeru's loud shout was heard.

What happened?! A reply to Ouka's fussing came together with Takeru's groan-like voice.

《"...s-sh...shoulder joint......dislocated......ngh..."》

bashyan *bashyan*, immediately after a sound of paint bullets bursting could be heard.

《"I-idiot! It's too fast no matter how you look at it! Hold out a little longer! What's going to happen with me in this position, after believing your words?! The sniper changed his target to me!"》

《"S-sorry... I can't see anything because a paint bullet crashed into my face."》

《"You're a useless guy just as usual!"》

She could easily imagine Takeru weeping after returning back to normal.

Rather then reversing the situation, it has worsened.

《"Just a little bit to Saionji's field... just a little bit more...!"》

Ouka muttered frustrated as she hid herself in an instant.

《"I-I won't hold out for much longer either... I'm running low on bullets."》

With communication from Usagi, gunshots and laughter of the vanguard was heard.

The communication became quiet.

Mari gave a small sigh.

"What are they doing... those guys."

Honestly, Mari couldn't say she was shocked.

In the first place, no one but Usagi was originally motivated, and then they were overturned with such a crappy provocation, she thought they really are cheap.

Even Small Fries had their small fry pride? Can't such a thing be given up on?

Ridiculous. Silly. It has nothing to do with her. She's not one of their comrades, she doesn't want to be join Inquisition in the first place.

She still didn't remember about herself, she vaguely understood she was from a different world than they are. That's what her lost memory told her.

That's why she just stared with cold eyes from the distance, there was an invisible border between them. And yet...

"W———......what am I... what am I doing."

...why, why does she desperately want to run to where they are.

"Really... what am I..."

Honestly speaking, she was envious. She was envious about being so desperate about something so pointless,

She simply envied them.

Being a part of Small Fry Platoon, being made fun of by 10th platoon and getting pissed at them. Those small fry idiots are suffering yet they want to win.

Above all, she thought it was interesting. Logically speaking, it was no wonder her heart danced.

These last moments, this major pinch.

If she found a way out, she would feel really great. Noticing that about herself, Mari smiled wryly.

"I'm simply an idiot myself... geez!"

Mari continued to question herself as she grabbed the sub-machine gun she was given and jumped out into the fountain square after breathing out.

She aimed the muzzle high up while looking at the sky, and stopped for a moment.

"——Be thankful to me, Small Fry Platoon! Only this time, only this single time! This time only, this Nikaido Mari-sama is going to lend you a hand!"

In this desperate moment, she squeezed the trigger.

After being shot, the paint bullets spread out in the sky, which caused the sniper to direct his attention to Mari.

Paint bullets released by the sniper's rifle hit Mari's body.

Mari stood in spot while covered with yellow paint.

《"Mari became the decoy! Go, Ootori!"》

《"I got rid of the vanguard over here already——Saionji!"》

A sound of Usagi running can be heard.

《"——I see them! Two people in the bell tower, taking them down!!"》

A gunfire roared in the distance.

Everything turned silent and Mari looked up to the sky as she sighed. The entire field was enclosed in complete silence.

An alarm notifying the end of the match rang, and cheers of the audience sounded at the same time.

『"The winner of first round of qualifications for the first grade C-Block has been decided! It's the 35th Test Platoon! Everyone give them a round of applause!"』

Hearing the announcement from the students that were doing live commentary, all members of Small Fry Platoon gave a loud shout of joy into their intercoms.

No one could predict Small Fry Platoon's victory.

"......what's this......the gun feels... pretty good."

Mari lowered her hat in order to hide her paint-covered face.

Her lips that weren't completely hidden, made a small arc laughing happily.

"See? Look! We were able to win, just as I have said! Be grateful to me for entering us by force!"

"Ohohohoh.", a haughty laughter resounded in the platoon's room.

Small Fry Platoon splendidly (?) won the first round, and went back to rest their bodies in their room.

The mock battle tournament is carried out throughout the entire week. The second round is scheduled for tomorrow, Small Fry Platoon's turn was over for the day.

"It's only the first round we won. We won't get any points unless we win the first year's league. Talk about impossible."

Takeru lied down on a sofa and was being treated by Ikaruga as he had terrible muscle pains and his body was covered by blue bruises. He shook his head denying Usagi.

"No! It's a big step forward for this platoon! I have taken the last step towards this victory! Come on, come on, you should be grateful to me!"

huu, Usagi took a deep breath and puffed her big chest.

"Yes, yes, amazing. Usagi-chan did really well."

"D-d-don't call me Usagi-chan! It doesn't feel like I was praised at all!"

Usagi tried to hit Ikaruga who was sitting on the sofa, but couldn't reach because Ikaruga held her head at a distance.

Takeru smiled wryly at their exchange and rubbed the compress that was fixed to his upper arm.

"Everyone did a good job today."

"Everyone except for Suginami is wrong!"

"...if you're going to be like that I have no choice but to rub your breasts."

"Kyaaa! I already told you not to touch them——!"

Usagi's chest was vigorously rubbed right beside him, but Takeru looked at Mari who sat on the sofa opposite of him. Because she took a shower to get rid of the paint, she was wearing Takeru's shirt since she didn't have spare clothes.

"Well, today's MVP is Mari isn't it."

Mari looked up surprised, and immediately turned away.

"I didn't really... I just got shot. It's not like I did anything."

Mari's face reddened a little causing everyone to stare at her. She blushed even more, her eyes watered up.

"That was fast."

Said Ikaruga.

"W-what was?"

"You, turning dere."

"I didn't turn dere!!'

"Then, I wonder what was that action during the match?"

Mari didn't try to deny what she did there, instead she tried to hide her face with a hat.

Look at that, "*mufufu*", Ikaruga laughed.

"Even though you're grinning by yourself immersed in the afterglow of victory."

"I-I'm not!!"

"A tsundere, huh... not really unique, but good enough. Even so, we were missing a small chest in our platoon."

"Wha——! That's rude! Who's small!"

Being called a small-chest, Mari leaned over while protesting against Ikaruga's words. Everyone's gaze gathered at Mari, or to be correct — at Mari's chest.

A faint bulge could be seen protruding from the shirt because she leaned over.

"…………"

"……small aren't they."

"——Shadapp!!"

"I-I think they're okay. Look, the size equaling status is a thing of the past."

"S-stop that or I'll beat you up…!"

Mari's eyes started tearing up, she checked the breasts of the girls from 35th platoon.

Ouka→Big. Suginami→Huge. Usagi→Big breasted loli.

"Uuu〜〜〜〜〜〜ngh…!"

While holding her hand next to her small bulge, she turned over towards the refrigerator where her last hope was.

Suddenly, the figure of Lapis who appeared unnoticed, and was munching loudly on ham as she stood next to the refrigerator could be seen.

Mari looked at Lapis' chest,

Lapis→Comrade.

She shed tears feeling defeated. Ikaruga sat next to Mari and hit her shoulder making a loud *pop* sound.

"Aren't you happy, having a comrade."

Holiness of a benevolent goddess was dwelling in Ikaruga's smile.

"You piss me off! Really piss me off! Why are you sparkling! Don't try to console me!"

"Do all witches have small chests?"

"It has nothing to do with being a witch right?!"

"Well there's no other use for them except for seducing Kusanagi. It's fine not having any, right?"

"Don't say it as if I don't have any at all!"

"It is as if you don't have any at all."

"I have some!! I'm quite proud of their texture and elasticity!!"

Ikaruga became interested in her small breasts characteristic and started teasing Mari.

Mari apparently also held a "tsukkomi" attribute. Apparently "small breasts" was a taboo term causing her to retort.

"It's just like Suginami said! These things just get in the way! They cause stiff shoulders and disturb you when you snipe! Also it's painful when the gun hits your chest because of the recoil..."

"Stop boasting!"

She's quite sharp.

For a while longer the three of them, Ikaruga, Usagi and Mari quarreled.

Takeru made a thin smile as he watched the scene. Looking at her like this, she was just a normal girl. Things like being a witch, or living in a different world from them didn't matter after all. Things like that didn't matter in this place. They would get used to Mari while interacting like this and get rid of their imaginary fears, is what Takeru thought from the bottom of his heart.

Platoon members will get along naturally, even Ouka somehow will...

Takeru glanced at Ouka. She stood while resting her back on the wall with arms folded.

"...what is it, Kusanagi."

"You, why are you standing in the back like that. Come over here."

"...w-why."

"We won the first round with a lot of effort right? We have to celebrate, come on."

Takeru picked up the orange juice from the table and held it out to Ouka.

She seemed troubled for a moment, but she came over making loud footsteps and took the cup.

That's when Ouka's eyes met with Mari's.

"...what is it."

Mari glared at Ouka.

At first, Ouka also glared at Mari, but she suddenly removed her gaze and made a face that said she was uncomfortable.

"...what, umm... I'll acknowledge you... even though I don't... want to. About you... acting as a decoy... honestly, you saved me."

While stuttering and faltering as she spoke, she thanked her and bowed.

She had the temperament of a samurai, in the first place, she wouldn't forgive herself if she didn't express her thanks.

Being thanked was out of her expectations, Mari averted her gaze with faintly red cheeks.

"I-it's not like I did it for you. Don't misunderstand, it's disgusting."

Hearing Mari straightforwardly say that, Ouka's expression changed all at once.

"...ah yes, it was a pretty good decoy. You really saved me, honest. Even you who can't do anything, can take the place of a scarecrow, how impressive."

"Nghh... is that so, I've had to cover certain someone's ass there, because the certain someone wasted the time Takeru bought as a decoy? It couldn't be helped that I had to act there——"

"You...!! I won't acknowledge you after all! I absolutely won't acknowledge the enlistment of a witch like you!"

"Ha? I refuse as well! Because of such a rotten elite like you this group is going to rot too!"

Sparks started to scatter and crackle between Ouka and Mari.

After a while he started to think it was pretty good atmosphere.

"I... I'm...! We'll fight later. Let's change clothes for now and look around colosseum. You didn't eat anything so you're hungry, right? The school deployed food stalls for the duration of the tournament. All of it is free, so let's go eat together everyone."

The one who quickly reacted to the word 'food' was Lapis who was done with the ham by the refrigerator. She quickly came over making loud steps and lightly grabbed Takeru's jacket.

Hearing about the stands, Mari's eyes lightened up with curiosity.

"Free... everything is free?"

"Yeah, the Chairman brings in traders every year. They are reproduced orthodox food stalls like the ones from before the war, they're unique old Japan style stalls. There are lots of things like gold fish scooping."

Mari's eyes were glittering. Perhaps it was her first time participating in a festival like this.

Just when Takeru thought they made up, Ouka turned away.

"Sorry, go ahead without me. I need to submit a report to the Chairman. We're on an escort mission after all, so we need to submit reports."

Hearing that stiff declaration Ikaruga meddled.

"You can do that later can't you? You'll disturb the group activity if you do it now."

"No can do. This is a mission so it has to be done."

"...same as usual, you can't read the mood can you."

"Guhh... I-if I say it's no good, then it's not! That's how it is. Let me off."

Shaking off the hook Ikaruga set up, Ouka stood up and headed out of the platoon's room. She stopped in the doorway before leaving and looked at Takeru.

"Umm... Kusanagi, after I finish reporting I'll contact you via e-mail... with details where and what... umm... I want you to tell me about it."

Hearing her request it while being so uneasy, Takeru almost spilled his drink.

"That's fine. I'll wait for you at specified location."

"I-I see... thanks."

Being requested something in such a clumsy manner, made Takeru incredibly happy.

"Well then, let's look around. Lapis, what do you want to eat?"

"I want to eat water balloons."

"...you can't eat that. Also, you really disappear and appear all of a sudden don't you."

"I won't mind if you think of me as a mysterious woman."

Takeru made an expression blank expression, he didn't know what she meant but still let her off.

"I want to eat that cotton candy thing. I haven't been able to eat any ever since I entered the middle school!"

"Usagi, don't go for cotton candy... that's something only children and anime characters want, isn't it?"

"Why are you always suddenly deciding things by yourself?!"

Taking the bare minimum of luggage, Small Fry Platoon were leaving together while acting noisily.

"Mari? Come here quickly, we're leaving."

After opening the door Takeru noticed Mari still stood in the platoon room and called out to her.

Mari just stood there, from the look on her face it was clear she didn't know what to do.

"Is it really... fine... for me to go together with you?"

"Hey... what are you talking about now."

Come on, Takeru held out his hand.

"Could you please hurry up! I hate women who dilly-dally!"

"Just come already, small boobs."

The three of them +1, waited by the door for Mari.

Mari made a modest happy smile as she took Takeru's big hand.

* * *

The sun was already hiding behind the horizon. The Colosseum was brilliantly lit up. Ouka listened to the distant noise as she knocked on the door of the Chairman's room.

"Anyone in?"

Since there was no reaction, Ouka turned the doorknob and opened the door without permission.

It looked like Sougetsu wasn't there after all, though Ouka didn't really care whether he was in the his room or not.

A dim light was entering the room, she put the documents she brought where they could be easily seen on the desk.

"All right, now... eh?"

After she breathed relieved that she finished delivering the report, she noticed another document placed on the desk.

Ouka didn't really care about ordinary documents, however, this document had a photo of a familiar person attached to it.

She checked if there's anyone else around, and picked it up.

Even though it was dim, she could still read it.

Ouka's complexion worsened as she read the character strings.

Her eyes opened wide, and her brows made an arc.

"Witch of... aurora... memory loss...? Ancient Wizard?"

She continued reading.

【"Nikaido Mari (the last name is a pseudonym), charged with murder, terrorism, and a number of minor crimes. X Month, X Day. During a Valhalla was without a doubt involved. X Month, X Day, judged to be guilty.】

Besides that, there was information on Nikaido Mari's upbringing, and why she cooperated with Valhalla.

Everything was written in detail.

And on the bottom, there were documents after documents.

Summary of a certain operation Nikaido Mari was used for.

After reading through it, Ouka was unable to hide her astonishment. Her face displayed fury, a tremendous anger. A rage as if she was betrayed by someone.

"This is... impossible! Such a thing——it can't be forgiven!"

Ouka squeezed the papers without hesitation, and swiftly jumped out of the Chairman's room.

* * *

It was seven o'clock pm. The sun was already hid quite a bit. And the colosseum was brightly lit up even though it was just the first day of the tournament.

A number of stalls were lined up.

In the glittering lights there were, goldfish scooping stalls, a shooting gallery, cotton candy, apple candies, yakisoba, takoyaki, and things like that. Food and entertainment from old Japan that rarely appeared in this era were lined up.

Though it was European-style last year, this year's people interest was stronger in the old-Japan style. The blood of refugees who fled from the disaster mixed up, things like races no longer exist. Because this land was former old Japan, people tended to show more interest in old Japanese customs.

The meeting place was very crowded.

"Whaa!! What's this! It didn't fall over even though it hit!"

"How clumsy. Are you really a sniper? Look at this, you should aim for something small, like this..."

**bonk*

"..........."

"...this gun is a defective product. I'm going to complain to the developer."

"Don't blame the gun now!"

"Shut up or I'll grope you."

"Kyaa!"

Four members of Small Fry Platoon came to the shooting gallery together. After the cork bullet missed time after time, Usagi was made fun of by Ikaruga who started rubbing her breasts. Lapis who wasn't interested in shooting, was sipping and slurping her yakisoba in the back.

Next to the two people bickering in the shooting gallery, Takeru turned the muzzle aiming at the prize.

———**clank*

Takeru narrowed his eye, and squeezed the trigger.

**bosun*

The beautifully fired cork bullet, hit the shopkeeper, a skinhead, straight in the balls.

The old shopkeeper glared at Takeru.

"...i-it wasn't on purpose!"

Takeru put another bullet, and aimed at the prize that was furthest away from the shopkeeper.

**bosun*

His muzzle was aimed at the very end, on the opposite side.

And yet, the bullet struck the head of the bald shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper took the toothpick out of his mouth, and he grabbed Takeru's collar. The blood vessels appeared on his arm that had rolled up sleeves.

"That wasn't on purpose!"

He begged for forgiveness with tears in his eyes. Takeru's prowess with a gun – which was also referred to as a 'curse', was in top condition even in a shooting gallery.

Next to him, Mari who made a suitable pose, aimed at the biggest doll.

"Eii!"

bosun*———*batan

"...no way, it fell down."

Mari stood there surprised, her eyes wide open.

Ikaruga and Usagi who were on the side, leaned over unable to believe it.

"Why?!! How did you do it with such a posture?!"

"It was adjusted... for small boobs to use?"

"What kind of adjustment is that!"

While retorting, Mari received a doll from the auntie who looked like the shopkeeper's wife.

It was a giant anteater doll, a meter big.

"This is unfair! I will show you that I'll definitely shoot down a big game as well!"

"Auntie, give me a better gun. Gimme something like a shotgun."

The two started shooting again.

After making sure neither Usagi nor Ikaruga are looking, Mari faced back to them and hugged the doll tightly.

She looked very, very happy.

Takeru even though he was still being grabbed by his collar, after seeing Mari's figure like that, made a relieved smile.

"Those two get along well."

As they walked through the street with stalls, Mari suddenly said that to Takeru.

He looked at the place Mari was looking at, in there were figures of Usagi and Ikaruga acting playfully.

"Usagi and Suginami originally got along just as bad as you and Ouka."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, the two of them were at each other's throats all the time, it was really troublesome. Both of them have a lot of pride, neither of them would give in. I don't remember how many times I was beaten up as I tried to arbitrate between them."

Looking at their backs, Takeru said that with a voice full of emotion.

Mari also smiled wryly.

"...you too someday, will become like these two, is what I thought."

"...w-with who?"

"With Ootori, I think you two are a pretty good combination."

"Give me a break. If it's with a woman like that, I'll pass,"

She faced away, but it looked like she didn't completely reject that idea.

Although it was still thorny, thanks to fighting together in a tournament, their relationship improved considerably.

"Going slowly is fine. You just became our comrade recently."

"...a comrade?"

"Yeah. Even though that's something I selfishly decided."

Said Takeru and laughed merrily.

"What you said yesterday, I thought about it all the time. About you living in a different world."

"......yeah."

"I think that's not how it is after all. I might not know much about these things, I'm talking with you right now, it's no different than talking with Usagi or Suginami, no different from Ouka as well."

"............"

"That's why, things like being a witch, or being normal, stop making a wall using such reasons like that."

He said.

"I won't force you to but..."

Takeru turned away in a little self-conscious manner. Mari stared at his embarrassed figure, then she suddenly looked down, and a shadow appeared on her face.

"If, by any chance."

"Nn?"

"If by any chance... I was a villain... would Takeru still refuse to put a wall between us?"

Uneasily, Mari asked that question with timid voice.

Takeru stared at Mari who was facing down, with widely opened eyes, and then suddenly,

Suddenly he burst into laughter.

"Wh-why are you laughing?!"

"Buhahahaha! I-impsshible! No matter how you slice it, you're not a villain material!"

"Y-you don't know that!"

"Is that so? You can't even discard an empty can, someone who can't forsake a comrade and comes out to become a decoy can't be a villain."

Takeru laughed again, tears appeared in his eyes.

Mari blushed and puffed her cheeks in response to Takeru.

"...what, I even asked you seriously."

With displeased expression, she turned away.

Takeru wondered if he laughed too much and tried to apologize, but he had to look back before that happened since Mari stopped moving.

She stood there lit up by the stall's lights, people walked past by her in both directions.

It looked to him like a distant scene, completely silent.

"I... about myself... don't really know much, I don't have much memories of the past."

Mari spoke about herself to Takeru for the first time.

"But, sometimes a bit of my memories return to me."

Her pupils staring at the distance, reflected something else.

Then she looked at herself, and narrowed her eyes.

"These memories... aren't any good. What if I am a horrible person... I'm scared of that."

"…………"

"I don't know if... it's okay for me to stay here... I think I might... not be qualified to."

A shadow appeared on Mari's face and her eyes were devoid of light. Takeru looked at her profile...

"I want you to stay here. That alone, is it not good enough of a reason to stay here?"

"......eh?"

"I still don't know much about you, not even a day has passed since we met... however, I'm already pleased with having you."

Mari looked at Takeru in daze.

He responded with a carefree smile.

"Don't worry. No matter what kind of person you are, I won't build any walls between us."

"...and what if I really am a bad person, what will you do."

"Then I'll get angry. I'll get angry, but we'll think together what to do, but I think we'll still be comrades."

Takeru said that embarrassed, and reached out to Mari.

She seemed to be at a loss for a moment, hugging the doll and facing down.

And,

"…………I-I see, dankyu."

He didn't hear what Mari had said silently with and trembling lips.

"Mm? Did you say something?"

"——It's nothing. Rather than that, what do we do next? Frisbee?"

Mari suddenly strongly took Takeru's outstretched hand and drew very close to him.

"Wa-wait... hey... crossing arms is..."

"What is it. It's normal to cross hands with a little sister, is that embarrassing as well?"

"It is embarrassing!"

"I did it! Takeru, so cute!"

"Are you some kind of granny?!"

With their arms combined, the two of them walk to the ring toss stall.

Takeru didn't notice, but in the corners of Mari's eyes, tears were slightly visible.

Stalls were lined around the colosseum.

Ouka who wanted to admonish and question Mari, didn't do it in the end. The reason was the fact that she overheard Mari's and Takeru's conversation.

While looking at them from behind as they entered the ring toss stall, Ouka stopped walking.

The words that Takeru said to Mari, stopped her from admonishing Mari.

『"No matter how you slice it, you're not villain material!"』

The sight of Takeru saying that as he laughed stopped Ouka from doing that.

Ouka couldn't and didn't want to break it to him, now that Takeru was happy to have obtained another companion.

She looked again at the documents she had in her hands after picking them up earlier.

"...that woman is a criminal... there is no doubt about it..."

Muttering to herself with hatred, Ouka turned on her heels, and started to walk in opposite direction of where Takeru was.

"...but this data is clearly weird."

Irritated, Ouka hit her other hand with the documents she held.

"I am... still not convinced. Determined to be guilty with just this much? That's not enough to judge her, there's not enough evidence..."

Ouka walked making loud steps.

"Allowing such a verdict to be passed shames Inquisition."

While walking quickly, she took out a mobile phone from her pocket.

The recipient responded shortly.

《"This is forensics."》

《"This is former Dullahan, Ootori Ouka. I want to borrow some investigation equipment right away."》

《"Understood. What do you need?"》

Ouka responded listing out the things she needed.

《"I apologize. Ootori Ouka is no longer a Dullahan. Such advanced tools are not——"》

"I'll take full responsibility. Don't worry, I'm the Chairman's daughter."

She stated that forcefully, as if threatening, the other side fell silent.

Familial influence was only useful at such times, Ouka laughed slightly in her mind.

《"......understood. When do you want to receive them?"》

"There's no time, right away."

Answering shortly, she finished the call.

Pissed off Ouka walked without hesitation, intending to work right away.

"——I'm not doing it to prove that woman's innocence, I'm doing it in order to prove she's guilty! It's absolutely not for that woman's sake! It's something obvious to do as a part of Inquisition! No, wait... why do I have to do such a thing in the first place? I wanted to eat apricot candy too... and yet... damn it, this and that, it's all that woman's fault! And she's even happily linking arms with him, that slut! I-I'm not envious at all! Not jealous even a little bit!"

Shouting to herself in the middle of the crowd angrily while resenting Mari, Ouka continued to walk. People turned around to look at her as if she was weird and tried to avoid her.

There was not much time left.

She had to learn the truth no matter what.

Deciding that in her mind, she rushed forward.

Chapter 5 - Necromancer's Laughter

The next day. AntiMagic Academy's mock battle tournament; second round.

It was sunny weather, the climate was good as well. It was a great day for the tournament, that's when acoustic feedback from announcer's microphone resounded.

All of Small Fry Platoon's members had already gathered and sat on the bench in front.

Three girls were sitting on the bench, Ikaruga on the right side, Mari in the center, Usagi on the left, even Lapis was sitting in the corner of it.

Takeru was preparing equipment behind the bench, he glanced at the field.

Currently, there was a ceremony being performed on it.

While on the first day, there was a concert of a famous pop idol, on the second day it was the unveiling of the newest model of heavily armored infantry exoskeleton by the alchemists. These were unlike the one Takeru and the others encountered during the "Trackless Psalms" incident, they were the newest state-of-art models.

Seeing Dragoons maneuvering while gliding at high-speed, Ikaruga who was sitting on the right responded with a "Haa haa" panting.

"Ohho! T-thin layer of orichalcum throughout the body... high frequency vibration blade?! That should cost as much as an aircraft right?! And those human-like movements thanks to the soft actuator, that's not something you can mass-produce! Nonsense!! I-i-i can't hold it in, this state-of-art design is so arousing..."

With drool hanging from her mouth, she looked excitedly at the body that was displayed on the field.

"What's so interesting in it...? Isn't that just a doll."

Mari complained as she watched the Dragoons, finding it boring.

"Not knowing the wonderfulness of Dragoons, Mari loses 12% life."

"Isn't it fine not to know about it..."

"That form, that sound, that form and its luster! Robots have their own eros that cannot be imitated by humans!"

"...what a pervert."

"A pervert?!"

She responded at full power, looking at Ikaruga, Mari put some distance between them.

Mari shifted to the side, her shoulder hit Usagi who was there.

And Usagi was...

RATTLE* *RATTLERATTLE**RATTLE**RATTLE**RATTLE**......

"Uwaa..."

She was embracing her rifle while shaking. Her face was blue, her lips purple.

"I heard about your fright before, but you really did well to survive up until now."

"S-ss-sss-shut up. R-r-rright now, I-I'm searching for s-spiritual unity. D-ddon't talk to me."

"If you mean that's mental concentration, I'm going to get angry."

"I wonder if it's really alright... this platoon... well, as long as I am here, aiming for victory isn't impossible——hey Takeru, you think so too, right?-"

She poised weirdly with her machine gun, and turned the muzzle to Takeru who was behind.

However, Takeru who was asked the question was looking around fidgety. He didn't look at Mari at all. Being ignored after making a cool stance with a lot of effort, Mari pouted with displeasure.

"......why are you looking around like that."

"No, it's just that I heard from Ouka that she might be a little late, I thought it's getting late already. That fellow didn't come to school this morning, I'm a bit worried."

"...what's with that 'Ootori, Ootori'. Are you dissatisfied with me?"

Takeru stood up after finishing his preparations, and he swung his arm around a few times.

"I'm not dissatisfied but, Ootori is our ace. Our fighting strength decreases by 80% if we don't have her."

Including him, and the three others it's just 20% of their fighting strength.

Mari moved closer and leaned towards Takeru who was still rotating his arm.

"What's with that! Are you really a captain? Trust your members more!"

"Y-you're too close. I do trust you, but I think being realistic is also necessary."

"Why are you talking about realism despite being a swordsmanship idiot."

Mari pointed muzzle of her gun at Takeru's chest.

Closing one eye, she laughed happily.

"Since I'm doing this, I want to win this. I'll be relying on you, mr. Captain."

Hearing Mari's words, Takeru made faint smile.

Because of various things happening, Mari's tension has been pretty high ever since she woke up. It didn't really matter for her whether they lost or won, definitely.

But since she was already participating, she wanted to win. Seeing her having fun like this, Takeru was the same. At first he reluctantly participated, but seeing Mari laughing like this, he thought it was good to participate.

"But she really is slow, that woman. Maybe she's scared?"

"There's no way that'll happen, no matter what."

Takeru smiled wryly at Mari's distrust.

At the same time, as if it was timed on purpose, the door behind them was opened.

"...sorry, I'm late."

The one who appeared, was Ouka, just as expected.

Ouka was dragging very large gun cases with her, and she moved in front of Takeru. Mari looked at Ouka's figure, and provocatively glared at her like usual.

"Oh my, the honor student sure is different from the normal executives. And here I thought you were scared and bailed."

Mari provoked her, Ouka glared at her sharply.

"Wha... what is it... I was joking. Don't take it seriously."

"..........."

Ouka removed her gaze from Mari, this time she looked at Takeru.

"Sorry, Kusanagi... we need to talk a bit."

Being suddenly told there's something to talk about, Takeru wondered what was it about.

Ouka stood there with a serious expression. Looking closely, her hair lacked luster, and dark circles could be seen under her eyes.

Fatigue could be clearly seen almost bleeding out of Ouka.

"What is it, Ootori... what happened?"

"There's no time. We'll be back as soon as possible."

Takeru was confused, and Mari made a question mark with both of her hands.

Ouka whispered directly as he was wondering what is it about.

"——It's about Nikaido Mari."

Being told that in a low voice, Takeru looked at Mari.

"? What is it?

Being stared at by two people, Mari had a questioning look.

Takeru felt an unexplainable anxiety, told the other platoon members to wait a while and followed Ouka.

After opening the door, they moved to hallway.

Ouka after leaving the room rested her back on the wall and folded her arms.

"...saying you want to talk about Mari, what the hell is that about?"

Takeru asked her fearfully, Ouka closed her eyes in response.

Ouka quietly told him about Mari.

....

....

"————————No... way..."

After Takeru listened to everything she'd said. all expression disappeared from his face.

* * *

AntiMagic Academy's colosseum tournament's audience seats.

In the middle of the crowd, Kurogane Hayato was sitting quietly in seats for the audience.

Instead of the Inquisition's uniform, he wore a black suit. He didn't want to be noticed by enemy's surveillance.

But he didn't look like a respectable human being.

"...all Spriggans, report on the situation."

《"There're no problems at the main entrance for visitors. No problems with bringing hazardous materials either up until now."》

《"At the closed back gate, the outer wall, sealed tower with magical heritages or contraindicated area, there are no abnormalities. We also have patrols in the school building, but there were no reports so far."》

Hearing reports from his subordinates from the earphone microphone, Hayato squinted.

"Continue cautiously. This is the day. Today is the day the forgetting magic will expire. The enemy will definitely come. Don't lose focus."

Hayato finished confirming the situation, and his attention moved to the colosseum as he linked his arms.

His right hand was touching the Relic Eater at his chest at all times, he was ready to shoot at any time.

"——Well, Kurogane-kun. How are you feeling?"

A voice sounded from the side, Hayato cast a gaze at the source of it.

Standing there was a person in a white suit and popcorn in one of his hands... it was Ootori Sougetsu.

"This place is dangerous. Please return to the chairman's room. I'll report remotely."

Sougetsu without regard to Hayato's advice sat down next to him.

"You're as rigid as ever. Isn't it fine to be a bit more rough?"

"If you think so then please increase the number of personnel. If that's the case I'll be more comfortable as well."

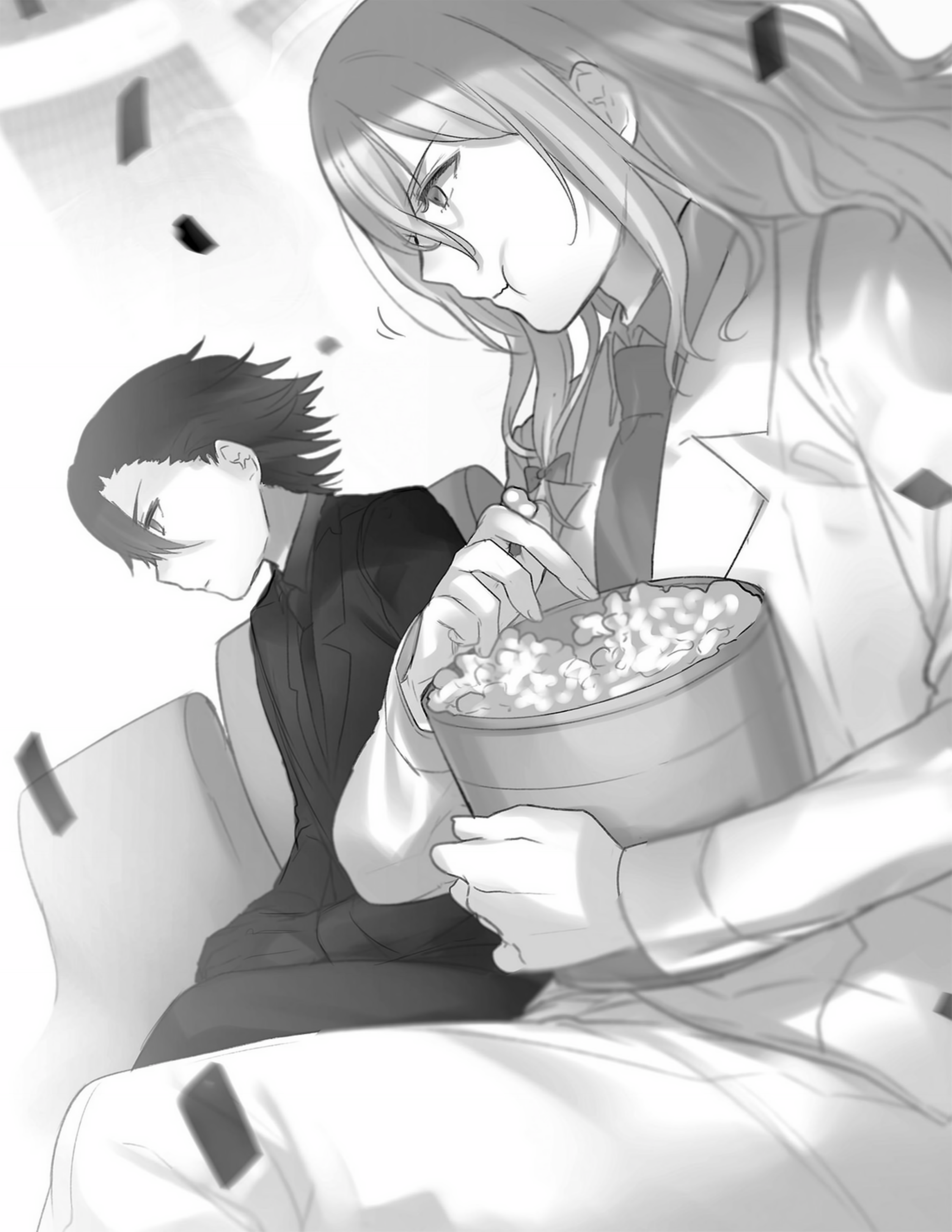
"There's no one else other than you from Inquisition that can be used. So that'd be difficult."

Munching on popcorn, Sougetsu laughed quietly.

"By the way, do you have anything to report?"

"Chairman, your daughter seems to be aware of truth on Nikaido Mari, she was sniffing around the crime scene last night."

"Oh, is that so? Hmm... well, it should be fine. Even if Ouka told Kusanagi-san the truth now, he won't be shaken."



Talking as if all of it was planned, Sougetsu stuffed himself with popcorn while having a cool expression.

Without batting an eye, Hayato stared at Sougetsu from the side.

"Even if you told him the truth from the beginning, there would be no problem right?"

"A plan using a witch with memory loss would be opposed by both Kusanagi-kun and Ouka. Convincing them would be troublesome. Being told that it's an escort mission, Kusanagi-kun will protect Mari-kun no matter what is going to attack them, there was no reason to tell them the truth."

"Because of the events in the past, he's unable to abandon a tragedy in front of him."

Sougetsu was, rather than that, in addition, was thrilled with excitement.

"...I wonder if they'll come, Valhalla."

"I don't know."

"Is that so. Well, it'll be a shame if they don't come, if they won't come, in that case we'll just have to mess around with Mari-kun's head a bit."

"............"

"The enemy won't come... you don't really think that do you?"

"......it's intuition. I don't have any evidence."

Hearing that Sougetsu laughed eerily, extremely pleased.

"Your intuition is always spot on."

He continued to stuff himself with popcorn even more happily.

The second round battle of tournament began, and at the same time Sougetsu applauded 'bravo—!'.

Once again, Hayato faced forward cautiously.

* * *

The buzzer indicating the start of battle rang.

Small Fry Platoon members spread out, they moved to their planned positions.

Although Mari rushed out bravely just as planned, suddenly Takeru grabbed her shoulder.

"——ummm, what is it? Isn't the match starting?"

"...Mari, don't move away from me."

"Eh? Isn't that different from the plan? I should now——"

"It's all right, come on!"

He said that with a strong voice, Mari tilted her neck.

Takeru looked unusually serious, he spoke to the intercom shortly afterwards.

"Usagi, move as planned. Get to a remote location far away from us."

《"I get it! That's how a sniper acts, it's obvious."》

Next, Takeru glanced at Ouka who was close by.

She responded with a light nod.

"Wha-what is it? What's the plan?"

"You just stick close to me. It'll be alright."

It'll be alright... what will? Mari's stare at Takeru seemed to say that.

While sweat appeared on Takeru's forehead, he looked at the surroundings nervously.

"Kusanagi, the entire audience can see you here, hide yourself behind an object."

"Roger that..!"

"Wa-wait a sec?!"

Ouka pushed Mari's back, and ran with full force.

Mari followed behind Takeru who became incredibly wary, not knowing why, she only followed after him.

Five minutes after the game started. They ran through the field, and hid themselves from the audience by entering a blind spot behind an object. Takeru entered the familiar fountain square area.

"...they're here. Confirmed appearance of 15th test platoon."

Ouka reported status of the site from the cover point.

"The building imitating a church across the street... one person at the bell tower, probably a sniper. One person near the entrance... probably another sniper I bet. One person by the fountain, two people in the rubble on sides."

"We have no time to spare for investigation. There's no plan worth mentioning. If possible, I want us to be shot on purpose by the opponent to leave early..."

While looking to the side at Ouka, Takeru grabbed the sword's handle while sweating profusely.

"At this time if Valhalla strikes... this is bad, we have no weapons."

"Bringing lethal weapons to the field is prohibited. Because of the systematic body check it's impossible. If attackers come, we have no choice but to summon Relic Eaters. Although we have spare weapons on the bench just in case, it's quite far away so getting them is unrealistic."

Takeru and Ouka with horrible expressions on their faces pulled Mari in.

And Mari was sandwiched between the two of them, and uncomfortable.

"...umm. Why do I have to be squashed by you? The talk about lethal weapons, it's quite disturbing, what is going on?"

Mari asked them not knowing the reason.

Takeru without answering her questions, just stared at her.

"...you don't need to think about anything. We will definitely protect you."

Mari didn't know anything, and asked anxiously. But Takeru deliberately ignored her question.

This is no time to tell her the truth... she'll just get upset.

The truth he has been told by Ouka today would be too heavy for Mari to bear.

If the circumstances were different, and they could explain it calmly......

Thinking like that, Takeru was not moving. Insults came from the audience.

"What are you doing! Fight!"

"It's uninteresting if you just sit still!"

"Do you have any motivation?!"

Hearing that many taunts, Takeru and the others grew impatient.

At this rate it'll be bad. They need to change sites at once to ensure Mari's safety.

Just when Takeru thought that,

"Kusanagii!! Are you looking down on me?! Haa?!"

In the center of the field from behind the fountain, 15th test platoon captain, Kirigaya Kyouya appeared.

Kyouya holding an assault rifle glared at Takeru, blood vessels could be seen on his temple.

"Do you even want to fight?! I'm challenging you here to crush you fair and square! Or do you wait until we trample over you bastards like bugs?!"

He exposed himself on purpose to stir them up.

Kirigaya Kyouya is surprisingly serious and has a tendency to be rude. That attitude is his habit.

Being fair and square, playing games without cheating, that was his personality.

......the feeling of nervousness softened a little bit.

"It would be good if we got shot and left early... but that's probably impossible."

"It can't be helped... we have to at least pretend we're fighting."

Takeru smiled wryly——at that moment,

A faint foreign sound entered his ears...

"——Wait!"

Takeru stopped Ouka and squinted.

Though it wasn't clear because of the noise from the audience, Takeru definitely heard something.

splsh splsh...a sound that felt as if it was tinged with moisture.

He looked around the field, he checked the locations Ouka mentioned earlier, but he no longer saw enemy's silhouettes,

...they weren't there.

The opponents from the 15th platoon could no longer be seen except for Kyouya.

"How annoying! Hey, 15th platoon! Don't shoot yet! I'll beat this guy up!"

Kyouya yelled towards the intercom.

But seeing as there was no response from his members, he frowned.

"Hey, you guys, can you hear me?! Answer me bastards!"

Kyouya yelled again while spilling saliva at it, at that moment.

splrtt...

———Black thorns have protruded from Kyouya's belly.

"...eh?"

Kyouya looked at his abdomen and witnessed what happened.

The moment he saw distorted thorns protruding from his belly, he vomited blood.

The thorns that grew out of Kyouya's belly, started to twist and grow at high speed aiming for Mari.

——— "*Soumatou*"!

Takeru immediately triggered Soumatou, and unsheathed the mock sword at once.

The blade captured the trajectory of thorns beautifully, and struck them with great force.

The thorns danced in the air, and raised a cry like some kind of insects.

"...wh...at... is this..."

Seeing something unbelievable, Takeru was confused. He confirmed Kyouya's fall in the distance.

And coming from the back, another figure.

Behind Kyouya, showing up in the opened door of the church——

"I... it was... it wasn't me..."

In charge of healthcare of 15th platoon, Yoshimizu Akira.

Takeru couldn't understand what kind of situation was that, what was going on.

Yoshimizu was crying. Her cries could be heard from the church reaching this place.

From her body——a flood of thorns was extending.

"...Yoshimizu...you...!"

"I-I don't know! It's not me! I'm not doing anything!"

"Then, what's that?!"

"I don't know!! Help me, Kusanagi-kun...!"

Hearing Yoshimizu's heartbreaking cries, it didn't seem like she was lying.

But those thorns... definitely grew out of her body.

"What should I do...!"

"Kusanagi, have Nikaido crouch!"

"But what about Yoshimizu?! And Kyouya?!"

"Protecting Nikaido is top priority now!"

He was yelled at by Ouka, but Takeru still kept an eye on Yoshimizu. Seeing her seek salvation, he couldn't just abandon her.

"He...lp... Kusa...nagi....kun..."

Weakly, Yoshimizu stretched her hand out to him.

But, her body slowly started to give off a radiance and a weird sound.

The radiance spread in no time, breaking down Yoshimizu's body.

"Kusa......nagi......ku..."

"——Yoshimizu!"

Takeru not knowing what to do, tried to stretch his hand towards her.

Instantaneously, Yoshimizu's body, cracked. It was literally, broken apart, and crushed.

The moment it shattered, black thorns overflowed from the inside.

It was a sight that could only be called odd. Thorns and liquid spilled from Yoshimizu's body.

All of the limp mass entangled and continued to form a giant bud.

As if there was nothing else in the world, Takeru and the others, even the audience fell completely silent.

After a few seconds, the bud stopped its activity.

And the bud, like a flower petals in the morning sun, flourished.

From the opening bud.

From among the flowers, a person in black——

"HAAAAAALLLLLEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLUUUUJAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The figure of a sorcerer who looked like the ringleader suddenly appeared.

A man wearing priestly garb made an exaggerated pose, like an actor on stage.

He looked at the field with a face drowned in ecstasy.

Decorated by thorns, he bowed to the audience, and finally bowed to Takeru and the others.

"We meet for the first time. I'm Valhalla's scout troop captain, Haunted. Nice to meet you. I want to participate in the mock battle tournament sponsored by AntiMagic Academy at this time! If you were to give me a round of applause I would be truly grateful."

Takeru, unable to accept what's happening, stopped thinking.

The audience was the same. Immediately after the form of the person calling himself Haunted appeared, they understood he was a sorcerer.

Chaos broke out in the venue, along with horrible screams.

Witnessing the emergence of a sorcerer the audience started running; trying to escape.

Haunted laughed like crazy seeing them.

"Thank you—! Thank you! Thank you, everyone—!!"

And, slowly, he turned towards Takeru.

"Well, I came to help you——My little Mari-san!"

He smiled gently.

Even though he was smiling, incredible chills ran down Takeru's spine.

"...w-who... why... do you know... my name..."

Mari stepped backwards, trying to make distance from Haunted.

"Why... what is... this... what's going on ?"

With a frightened voice, looking as if she was about to run any moment, Mari said that worried

Takeru regained his sanity hearing Mari's voice, he glared at Haunted sharply.

Haunted moved towards them, getting closer to Mari.

"What's wrong? Mari-san. You don't have to be that scared. I came here to help you."

"No... don't come...!"

"That frightened expression of yours is wonderful. It's unbearable. I want to hug you. I've never hugged you, but I want to. I want you to be even more scared as I embrace you."

Before his chilly smile, Mari retreated with tears in her eyes.

Ghastly as if grim reaper appeared in front of them, the sorcerer stepped forward. Takeru couldn't forgive it. He stood in front of Mari.

In order to protect her.

"Ufu...ufufufufufufu! How fun. I'm happy. It's the first time I've seen Mari-san so scared of me. It's so arousing I can't stop myself."

But Haunted did not stop walking.

As if he didn't acknowledge Takeru's existence at all.

"Come on, be more scared please. Starting from now onward, in this stage of mine——."

Haunted stretched his hand, reaching out to her.

At that moment.

———**dan!**

A gunfire sounded, and penetrated from the side of Haunted's head.

Haunted staggered while smiling eerily.

Starting with that one gunfire, a tremendous amount of bullets hit Haunted's body.

"Gah...! Ughh...! Geh...!"

The bullet storm didn't stop. It hit Haunted's body, messing it up.

Takeru looked towards the audience to see what's going on.

There, was the Inquisition who assembled and took up their guns.

* * *

"Keep firing. Don't stop even for a moment. Keep shooting even if that guy is a lump of meat."

From the audience, Hayato issued a command to all of the Inquisitors.

Haunted's body on the field was convulsing vigorously, it continued to be pierced by bullets.

《"Why?! There should be no problems with Yoshimizu Akira!"》

From the earphone came out a voice of dismay from his co-workers.

Hayato, while watching as Haunted continued to be shot, answered to his colleagues.

"The enemy is a necromancer. Yoshimizu Akira was probably already killed by the enemy. What you saw up until now, was a copy produced by that guy."

《"A copy—...?"》

"A clone, homunculus. Used by necromancers to infiltrate, it's a common practice of theirs. That's a clone of Yoshimizu Akira's body, it was sent back to school while it was infested by seeds of a magical organism, the seeds emerged at the same time tournament started."

《"Magical organisms... producing things on such a scale...?! Also, transferring a human by using a magical organism... it's the first time I've heard of such a thing!"》

"It's called 《Belladonna Garden》. It's a pinnacle of heretical magic. It should be common sense to know it."

Hayato squinted.

"I told you. I told you to expect they will come to kill the target in a way we can't imagine."

《"............"》

"That's how magic was in the first place."

Hayato switched the communication, and gave orders to other members.

"Security is to focus on evacuating civilians. Don't let anyone die."

《"Affirmative."》

Hearing Hayato ordering his subordinates, Sougetsu watched leisurely while gnawing on popcorn on the side.

"It's fine not to evacuate them isn't it. The priority is to capture that guy."

"With all due respect, I don't want to sacrifice a single civilian. As long as I'm here I won't let a doomsday like the Hero attack happen."

"Well, you were at a business trip at the time... oh well. As long as you capture him properly."

"Capture is impossible. Unless we go for the kill, we won't win against this guy."

"Didn't we talk about it before? Is that impossible even for you?"

"It is impossible."

"Mm... we can draw information even from a dead body, you can kill him but you have to preserve his original form properly."

"Thank you for your consideration."

Sougetsu said that while clearly having fun.

Looking at Haunted who was kneeling as he was showered by storm of bullets and finally fell down on spot.

Confirming he has fallen, Inquisitors stopped shooting.

"Who told you can stop shooting!!"

Hayato roared with his eyes wide open.

《"B-but he fell down——"》

"——Everyone prepare for interception! Incoming!"

Hayato howled, and took up his gun.

Hayato's gun was a very large revolver, giving off a black ulster, its caliber was 0.50. The total number of bullets was five. Its form was black and beautiful, and it looked clunky.

Engraved on its barrel was "The Malleus Maleficarum I "Caligula" ",

Hayato pointed the muzzle towards Haunted while raising his body half-way up.

At the same time,

"——Kuuuuuuuuroooooooooogaaaaaaaaneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

Shouting with a queer voice, Haunted lifted his body from where he fell down.

In an instant. Inquisitors witnessed a phenomenon neglecting gravity, and could not move.

Haunted with a face and body full of holes, laughed at Kurogane Hayato.

That's when below Haunted's feet, thick thorny tentacles flew out from the "Belladonna Garden".

There were five of them. All of them, grew at tremendous speed and flew towards the Inquisitors and the escaping public rather than Hayato himself.

Hayato in a fluid motion, shot all of the tentacles.

All five bullets were fired in an instant. The five bullets with 0.50 caliber that were shot landed on tentacles. It wasn't power of an ordinary gun. The sound discharged was like an anti-ship cannon, there was a huge impact.

Bullets crashed into tentacles but the power wasn't enough to kill them, they were blown away in other direction rather than thrusting into the audience.

"———!"

However, one of the tentacles was blown away towards the control tower that was adjacent to the colosseum.

The tentacle hit a spot on the base of control tower, it started falling straight into the centre of colosseum.

"Retreat!"

He shouted towards all of the Inquisitors.

The control tower fell straight into the field.

**RUUMMBLE*——!!*

As the control tower fell down, a tremendous amount of dust rose up and a roar could be heard inside of colosseum.

After enduring and trying not to be blown away by the impact and cloud of dust, Hayato yelled into the microphone immediately.

"Damage report...!"

《"Left wing here, **cough* *cough**... we have injured but the audience escaped a direct hit."》

《"Right wing here, large number of wounded. As for deaths... we don't know."》

"Everyone injured is to leave together with general public, close the gates right after withdrawal. What's the situation of 35th test platoon?"

《"...unknown. Communication is cut completely. Intercom failure... or maybe..."》

Listening to report, Hayato's eyes convulsed.

He looked at the cloud of dust at the same time. Haunted definitely won't die from something of this degree.

With ominous certainty, Hayato aimed his gun at the field.

"...where is he..."

Visibility was terrible, there was not a single human figure visible.

No. There was a silhouette crouching on the ground. Just one.

Hayato tried to aim the muzzle at the figure.

"——《Number of the Beast》"

Just as he heard a voice from the cloud of dust, a huge magic circle appeared beneath the silhouette.

At the same time, he saw Haunted's figure gesturing with a middle finger towards him.

"...Haunted...!"

"See you, Kurogane Hayato."

That moment, from the magical circle around Haunted, a wave of magic overflowed.

Immediately after, he could hear ringing in his ears——**bashiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin**.

Covering just the colosseum's field, a huge black wall appeared.

Although Hayato squeezed the trigger immediately, the activation of magic was slightly faster.

The bullet hit the black wall, it fell down to the ground far from reaching Haunted.

Hayato grit his teeth and lowered the muzzle reluctantly.

"...a new model of magical barrier."

Sougetsu by his side put a hand on his chin looking interested, and went to see the barrier that appeared.

The barrier that was stretched out by Haunted looked like a black shadow, white magical circles hovered on its surface and flowed.

"The magic is very dense. It contiguously modifies itself and the magical procedure is flowing. We can't break it normally. To beat down this damn thing... Vlad is probably necessary."

"...Ootori is inside the barrier. Probably, summoning her from the inside would be impossible. It seems to have a property shutting out magic interference."

"Is that Caligula's analysis?"

"Yes. But to maintain a barrier with magic this dense, it should be impossible for a long period, even if it's Haunted. About ten minutes I would say."

While frowning, Sougetsu threw away the popcorn that was covered with sand. At the same time as the popcorn hit the ground, screams sounded from the audience.

"?!"

Hayato looked towards the source of screams, he saw one of Spriggans floating close by.

But looking closer, he was not floating.

His abdomen was pierced, and he was raised up.

What pierced the abdomen of Spriggans,

Was the new model of Dragoon unveiled at opening ceremony of the tournament.

"——Who's piloting that."

《"I-I don't know! After the ceremony ended, no one has touched it yet!"》

"......it can't be."

Hayato was horrified. He had a faint premonition. The worst-case scenario.

No way, Dragoon, a weapon from Inquisition's side——

《"——Confirmed analysis of the Dragoon! It's unmanned! The system has been taken over!"》

Just as he was told through the intercom, the pierced Inquisitor was thrown away, the Dragoon flexed its body.

——**VUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!**

A roar that didn't look like it originated from a machine. The artificial eye of the machine glowed red, something like blood vessels ran all over. In fact, even the cracking armor looked like it had pulsating blood vessels.

Its appearance was no longer that of a machine, it was organic-like and meaty; grotesque. It clearly looked like it was interfered with by magic.

The number of Dragoon's was one in the left wing, and one in the right wing.

"This is weird... the new model is covered in lightweight orichalcum, which is an anti-magic material. Magical interference from the outside should be impossible unless you break the armor."

"............"

"Out of all possibilities, the devices inside of it were interfered with at the stage of assembly... or, the armor isn't original orichalcum, that's it. Without thinking too long, it's probably the latter."

"...Chairman, please give me permission to use Relic Eater."

"I don't mind. Destroy it. Because of the barrier I don't know what's going on inside now, we have to leave the sorcerer to Kusanagi-kun."

Good grief, Sougetsu shook his head and sighed.

After obtaining permission, Hayato walked towards the Dragoon.

His face was hidden behind his long bangs; his face couldn't be seen.

Hayato said to earphone mic.

"All forces withdraw at once."

《"B-but then——"》

"Withdraw. I'll take them on alone."

Hayato cut off the communication instantly after, he lifted his revolver in his hand. He removed the cylinder latch and put bullets in one after another.

After he finished loading the bullets, he rolled the palm of his hand rotating the cylinder vigorously. The revolver's cylinder rotated loudly.

Hayato raised the arm holding the gun, and looked up. From behind his bangs, his eyes displayed the murderous intent of a tyrant. He glared at the Dragoon with these eyes, and announced.

A sign of conflict.

Hayato's hand shook in response to recoil of the cylinder.

"It's time for Caligula the Tyrant. Release the hammer."

......*click*......

Following Hayato's instruction, Relic Eater "Caligula's" hammer made a noise. A sound that came from the black barrel of the gun. It was the sound of something dropping.

* * *

Immediately after the collapse of the control tower.

Takeru raised his body in a cloud of dust, and confirmed Mari's safety as he coughed.

"Are you alright, Mari?!"

"*cough* *cough*, I'm fine."

Takeru helped Mari stand up and checked if there are any injuries on her.

He was relieved because she looked safe for the time being, he reconfirmed what the situation status was.

The sorcerer's surprise attack, suspension of the contest, collapse of the tower, separation from Ouka.

The worry about his comrades, the death of Kyouya and Yoshimizu.

He pressed his intercom's switch and tried communicating with his comrades.

"...no good. It's broken."

Takeru said after checking the intercom.

Mari checked her own intercom as well, and shook her head.

Takeru clenched his fist in frustration.

...shit. I'm worried about the others, but I need to focus on protecting Mari.

Trying to evacuate Mari to a safe place, Takeru grabbed her hand.

"...it looks like running away is impossible. A barrier was erected."

Being told that, he looked up to the sky, a dense black wall blocked out most of the sunlight and covered the entire colosseum.

No wonder if it was so dim in here.

He thought that, when,

"There's nowhere you can run to——Mari-san."

A voice sounded from the cloud of dust. Takeru clenched his teeth, and looked towards the source of the voice. There——was Kusanagi Takeru's enemy.

"Please look, lookie here. I'm full of holes. Don't you think it's horrible since I took so much effort in dressing up?"

"...you bastard...!"

"Getting priest's clothing is quite hard you know. I'll have to spend another day sewing it. Or maybe Mari-san will sew it for me? Because Mari-san is surprisingly homely, I suppose she's quite good at it? Oh, while you're at it, can you sew the gaps in my heart, can you make my heart beat faster?"

Haunted looked at Mari ignoring Takeru, he advanced towards Mari and stretched his arm to her.

Takeru had Mari crouch, and faced Haunted.

"Keep down like that. I'll deal with this guy."

While not knowing what to do, Mari dropped down a few steps away.

Seeing that, Haunted stopped walking.

"...I've been wondering for a while... Mari-san, who is this young man?"

While tilting his head and smiling, Haunted asked her.

"Can it be... that he's your boyfriend? Aha, no, there's no way that's true because Mari-san always thinks about me. So there's no way that's it. That's how it is it's impossible isn't it say that's not true because I love you If I no longer love you I'll cry and have to kill you even though I don't want to kill you."

"Shut up, you stalker asshole."

Takeru interrupted the tsunami of words, and glared daggers at Haunted.

Haunted's smile was unchanged, but for the first time, he looked at Takeru.

"...I'm caught."

Haunted loudly scratched his head and faced Takeru.

He changed the direction he was walking in, and he tiptoed towards Takeru.

"Interfering with mine and Mari's reunion, who do you think you are?"

With a striking smile, he tilted his neck.

And,

"Don't get too cocky, I'll kill you——you shitty brat."

He smiled with half-closed eyes, and said that to Takeru as if he was dealing with garbage.

Takeru was unfazed. But he returned those words back.

"That's my line——you rotten sorcerer."

Spitting that out with hatred, Takeru took a stance with a hand held out in front of him.

——Remembering it. No, it was engraved in him.

From the time of Hero attack, the language of soul that flowed in his head.

Embodying the anti-magic, words that were a warning.

A sign summoning one's partner.

"Summis desiderantes affectibus——"

His right hand held out in the front, swung to the side to cut through.

"——Malleus Maleficarum!"

At that moment, an azure-colored magical circle appeared under Takeru's feet.

The magic shined and emitted azure particles. The particles covered Takeru's body and hardened like ore, shaping the armor.

And finally, after a remarkably bright light flashed, Takeru held a sword in his hand. A Relic Eater, Mistilteinn.

The one Takeru has contracted——a sword that cuts through all magic.

《"System all green. 100% matching rate. "Witch Hunter" complete. Good morning, host."》

In his head Lapis' voice echoed.

Takeru turned into an azure-colored knight, and made a combat-ready pose.

"...Lapis. Do you have any information on the enemy?"

《"A member of enemy forces, Ancient Wizard, classified as an S-Class danger. Please take note of these."》

S-Class danger... in other words, the priest in front of him was equal to witches and sorcerers from before the war.

"...can we do it?"

Of course, Takeru would do it even if it was impossible.

《"The chances of winning normally would be 50%, but the target is currently maintaining high density barrier. Fighting a battle while maintaining the barrier means that target does not have much magic available——the chance to win is equal to 100%"》

Hearing that, Takeru glared at Haunted.

Haunted blinked repeatedly and sweat could be seen on his cheek.

"You... are you by any chance the person who took down the Hero?"

"...so what if I am."

"No, umm, I didn't think you would be a Relic Eater contractor... umm, you know, it's not like I wanted to do anything bad and slaughter you, you know? Well, I did but, that was because I didn't know you were a Relic Eater holder."

"..........."

"L-look, Mari-san was my colleague before, I came to either help her or kill her because I was told to by the people above me... umm, that's..."

"What are you talking about."

"...umm... c-could you please overlook it this time?"

Said Haunted while making a strangely subservient smile.

Takeru's face convulsed with anger.

Overlook? Did he say overlook?

Telling him to overlook... all of that?

Everything in front of him turned red, his murderous intent skyrocketed.

"...sorry...but I'm not that——nice of a person to do so."

With a hoarse voice, like a beast, Takeru told Haunted.

——The next moment, Takeru burst.

Without a sliver of mercy. Without a sliver of compassion. Without a sliver of reason.

He released all he had, and tried to cut Haunted.

He triggered the Soumatou, and the entire world slowed down.

He had only one goal. To have that puny sorcerer puke his guts out.

The face of the guy he saw. Looked like someone terribly frightened, screaming.

With all his body and soul had, Takeru tried to cut Haunted with his sword from the above.

"——?!"

Suddenly, Takeru felt chills on his spine.

Haunted's expression from a moment ago. Expression deeply frightened. The unchanged expression.

That face, even though he had activated Soumatou.

——It suddenly laughed.

"——Pierce him, Dáinsleif."

In that split second, a voice sounded.

At a speed Takeru couldn't capture, something pierced through his chest.

"—keru————Takeru! Wake up! Takeru!"

《"Ho——st——Host. Please wake up."》

He opened his eyes. And noticed his consciousness was lucid, not knowing what happened, he just opened his eyes.

Instead, a tremendous amount of blood spilled from his mouth.

"...I...what...happened..."

《"We have received a strike from the enemy. My apologies, my analysis was wrong. I should have considered this possibility."》

"...wh-at... was I...hit...with..."

《"To express it briefly, it was just a 'thrust', however..."》

Hearing Lapis' words, Takeru looked up a little. In the front. In his line of sight.

And there was... a man wearing an armor looking like night itself.

That shape was as if...

"It's the first time I've seen a sword-type Relic Eater. Even though I've had expectations. Isn't this a let down."

——Just like Takeru in "Witch Hunter" form, but the face was definitely Haunted's.

"Sorcerers being bad in close combat is just something that happens in games... Nacht, it's been a while since you were in "Hero" form, how do you feel?"

《"There's no problem with armor particles, there's no imbalance in magic power, confirmation is a pain in the ass so let's say all's okay. Condition is good, extremely so."》

He heard a voice in his head, an innocent, laconic and alien voice.

It was somehow similar to Lapis. Takeru hypothesized as he was stunned.

"...it can't be, that guy as well..a Relic Eater..."

《"No, that's a lost-type Magical Heritage. The name's "Dáinsleif"... the shape is different, but it's the possession of northern Europe's hero, it was called the Sword of Ruin."》

Hearing that information from Lapis, Takeru was horrified.

A sword? To a sword? He lost against another sword?

"......!!"

Feeling a tremendous sense of loss, Takeru tried to stand up.

《"You shouldn't stand yet. Your right lung is damaged."》

"Can't you... fix it."

《"One of the intrinsic characteristics of Dáinsleif is inflicting wounds that cannot be healed. Although healing is impossible, reproduction is. Assuming there is a problem, that would be..."》

"...it would take time."

《"...yes. Once again, I apologize, it was caused by my poor performance."》

"Haa... what are you talking about, I was the one who got hit by... it......!"

Admonishing himself, Takeru tried to stand up again.

"You can't, Takeru! You'll die!"

Mari came and clung to him with a bitter cry, she tried to stop him from standing up. She was crying.

"Don't...make such a... face..."

"But... your body is..."

"I promised... that... I'll protect you."

Mari looked at the injured Takeru, she made expression as if it was her fault, crying and trembling.

Seeing himself become so miserable, Takeru bit his lower lip.

As soon as he clenched his fist, he vomited blood.

His consciousness faded away, with just one hit, it ended without him being able to do anything.

Even as his heart and mind tried to carry on, his body was honest.

While Takeru admonished himself constantly, Haunted who equipped a Magical Heritage smiled to Mari again.

"Mari-san. Let's go back. You're witch, you can't stay in a place like this."

"......"

"This is the human side isn't it? You should be together with us, who are witches as well."

Haunted reached out to Mari tenderly.

Mari while her body was trembling desperately covering Takeru to protect him.

"With someone like you... don't lump me together with you...! I'm nothing like you!"

She shook off his hand, refusing Haunted.

Haunted blinked three times after hearing Mari's words.

"You don't know me? Haa? Aah, that's right. I completely forgot about it! Mari-san forgot everything because of memory loss magic!"

《"How careless."》

"Careless indeed, truly careless. Please wait, I'll release you from it right away."

With a wry smile, Haunted raised his right hand.

And, as if he was calling a waiter, he clicked with his fingers. *clank*... In Mari's head, like something like a switch was turned on.

Right away, all the negative emotions over her face just now, also the fear causing her to tremble, everything, vanished from Mari.

And, a violent wave of memories flowed, swallowing Mari's consciousness.

* * *

——Magic is not for hurting people, it's something that makes people happy. That was, the pride Mari had once.

Nikaido Mari, was from the orphanage on the border.

The boundary line was the modern slum. Because of the Witch Hunt War Akashic Hazard's influence, the world has become inhabitable because a field called Sanctuary appeared.

Ruins were spread near the Sanctuary and no normal human would willingly live in them.

However, because of the increased confusion and war refugees, the gap between the rich and poor was pretty wide. There was no place for poor to live in, and they were forced to live in the ruins near the Sanctuary.

Even now, after 150 years, it was the place where the darkness gathered.

The facility Mari was raised in, although it was located by the border, it was a location for humans.

The facility's chairman accepted Mari, even though she was a considerably powerful witch. He knew Mari was a witch, and yet accepted her. All children were younger than Mari, even though they were cheeky, they loved Mari dearly.

However, the facilities were poor.

In order to help everyone, Mari used magic to do bad things. earning money, she tolerated the evil guys, and obtained money through dangerous means, she felt no resistance to doing these things.

When the director learned of that,

She didn't approve of this, and whispered into Mari's ear with a sad face.

『"Doing bad things will come back to you in the end. What's important is not to hurt yourself. If you use magic, don't use it for evil, use it for good things."』

『"…………"』

『"You see, Magic is not there to hurt people. It's there to make people happy."』

From that moment onward, Mari was proud of these words.

She earned a decent amount of money, though still poor. The happy days continued for a while. However, happy times never last long.

In a certain incident, Mari lost everything.

Because she carried out crimes without exposing her identity, one of the clients she once helped, set fire to the facility.

It was already too late by the time Mari reached the facility, it was in a sea of flames.

——It's my fault.

Mari blamed herself.

——It's my fault.

Mari continued to blame herself.

As the burning facilities was reflected in her pupils, when her desire to live, when she was about to lose everything.

The one who appeared was... Valhalla's Haunted.

『"The children from this facility, are under Valhalla's protection. If you want us to release them, help us."』

It was a kind of blackmail. Haunted said the children were safe, he proved it to her by letting her hear their voices, and if she wanted to meet them, she had to join Valhalla.

There was no choice, Mari couldn't refuse.

For the children's sake, Mari did everything other than killing. She hurt so many people. How many people she deceived, Mari could no longer remember.

Because she always averted her eyes as she did that.

However, the reality that she couldn't avert her eyes from, eventually came.

That was a few days after she was instructed to obtain remains of Excalibur by Valhalla,

The day Hero attacked... the city was wrapped in screams and despair.

『"It... shouldn't be like this...!"』

No matter what excuse she used, the look in eyes of people that were dying was unforgiving.

『"I need to help them... because of me, so many people...!"』

Adults, old people, children, even babies. They all got indiscriminately killed.

She picked up a baby from its mother's corpse, it was still breathing, she was still able to save it. That's what she hoped for, but it was soon turned into despair.

The eyes of the baby that was hugged to its mother's breast, turned towards her. Its skin had no longer a color of a living being's, blood vessels ran all over its body.

『"———Ma...ma..."』

The baby became a corpse eating demon. And yet it called its mother, that shattered Mari's heart.

* * *

"It's... my fault."

Muttering after recovering her memory, Mari stood up.

"How is it? Did you remember?"

Haunted asked anxiously.

Mari didn't answer. Her memories returned, and she stared into empty space.

And, with her eyes unfocused, she knelt in place.

And she raised both of her hands to her face, she could feel the weight of what she has done crushing her.

"I'm happy then. You remember everything don't you! Come on, me and Mari are the same, right?"

"......uuu......aaa......"

"You helped to summon the Hero. And when I was collecting corpses, you stood on the sidelines. You are responsible for the massacre together with me."

"......aAAaa......"

"It's all right, I'm not gonna blame you, you know? Because you wanted to save the children from the facility, and that's why you cooperated with me."

"I... what have I done..."

"Mari-san, you were desperate weren't you. To save your important family, you've been working hard. At the expense of other people, you wanted to help those important to you. I think it's a very wonderful thing to do."

Haunted gently praised Mari.

He had a benevolent expression, like a real priest.

"But, that's why Mari-san is the same as me. You weighed the people unrelated to you and those important to you, and you choose the ones that were important. You deserted the unrelated people, but as I collected corpses. Mari-san was preparing to run away from me."

The man with a charitable expression, hollowed out Mari's heart.

"Isn't that right? See? We're the same."

Mari had a smile that embodied despair. Despairing, Mari continued to repeat "I'm sorry."; apologizing to everyone.

As she grew up, the facility's chairman told her the right way to use magic.

Believe in me and wait, children.

And she did that at the expense of innocent people.

When she cooperated with them, she was realistic about it.

She decided on her own. Even if it's evil, she convinced herself.

But... after losing her memory, and meeting Takeru and the others, something changed.

Because she went blank once, the truth was too heavy; unbearable. She was a villain, there was no other possibility. Her circumstances were not that of a victim.

There were hostages so she had no choice. She never thought so. Victims were deprived of everything without knowing anything.

"Mari-san really is gentle... to me, watching your heart break down is a lot of fun, and equally painful. So in order to get rid of these painful emotions... will you go back to Valhalla together with me?"

Mari's face that was distorted by despair turned to Haunted.

Haunted spread his arms, inviting Mari in.

"Although it would be against orders from above, let's meet the children from facility as soon as we return. If we stay here any longer, there will be a battle. Also, that boy, if you were to come with me, I won't have to kill him. Everyone will be saved."

"............"

"If you come back to me once again."

With a smile like a saint, he reached out to her again.

"You don't want——for anyone else to die because of you, right?"

Mari was stunned with a despairing expression. Against this man, Takeru couldn't win. If this went on a witch like herself will kill all members of Small Fry Platoon.

This man, will do it by all means even if Mari refuses. That's what he was ordered to do by Valhalla.

This man preferred having fun as he watched people struggle, he considered cries of humanity a reason to celebrate, and would kill you with delirious joy.

Mari stood up staggering, and walked giving up on everything.

She began to walk towards her original despair.

In the end, with her back to Takeru, she said.

With tears flowing, and a sad smile.

"I wasn't one after all... a person you thought I am."

She didn't ask for help, and continued.

"I'm sorry, Takeru... I have betrayed your expectations... I'm really sorry."

These were the best parting words Mari could think of.

* * *

Takeru who lost consciousness was remembering things from the past.

That was, before he was taught Double-Edged style by his master.

It was when Takeru still only knew swordsmanship made to kill humans.

A time where he still had his family.

——Takeru, you choose.

That's what his father told him.

Without knowing anything, without being taught anything, with just a body carved and sharpened for the sword.

He lived. Adjusting the anger inside him. Changing the anger within him.

To put it all into his sword, and break the enemy's head with it.

Enraged, and yet calm.

It was his father's teaching. It was the thing he learned from his father.

To kill, or to protect, it's your choice.

That's only up to you. They were the last words his father left him.

Takeru didn't know. What his father's words meant. He didn't know, there were enemies in front of him. So he just had to kill them.

He just had to swing his sword, and drop it down on their necks.

Ever since he was born, that's what he was taught.

——Onii-chan...

And yet,

Takeru couldn't choose either. He just stood at the sidelines.

The world in front of him was in flames, Takeru wailed.

His important person was taken away in front of him, and Takeru was in daze.

What should he choose, what's right and what is wrong.

If you make a choice, don't regret it.

While questioning himself Takeru was breaking down.

Whatever he chose he would definitely regret it.

Even so.

Not choosing at all, was the greatest sin. That's what Takeru thought as he lied bathed in morning sun's light.

Continuing to apologize to people who died.

A human called Kusanagi Takeru, headed towards an end.

* * *

As he dreamed, Takeru heard everything.

Mari walked towards her despair.

So that she doesn't have to sacrifice anyone; she walked the path she chose.

However, that was a mistake, that's not a choice. He yelled in his mind, his own past and Mari's overlapped. What happened to Mari, and what happened to himself. All of it overlapped, and blended.

......wrong.

Takeru while faintly conscious, moved his finger to sides.

Mari and I... are different.

He put force in the finger he moved, and grasped the sword.

...she's different from someone like me, who couldn't choose.

Through the hole in his lung, air wheezed as it leaked, tremendous pain ran through him.

In order to stand up, Takeru breathed even though it hurt him. He made his decision and started breathing, and he hit his leg.

With anger overflowing his chest, Takeru stood up while he continued bleeding.

"As if I'd let you go...!!"

He stabbed his sword into ground, he had to stand at any cost.

His body was battered. He had wounds all over his body, but his eyes weren't dead.

Bright red eyes which displayed righteous anger, he didn't lose his will to fight.

"...Mari, there is something I need to tell you..."

As he spat those words, Mari stopped walking.

"...this fact...might be painful for you..."

"............"

"...however, unless you know the truth..."

He stabbed his sword further, and he moved by dragging his body.

"...the children from the facility you wanted to save..."

He clenched his teeth, and told her truth. The truth Mari didn't know even after her memory came back.

"The children you wanted to see are...!"

He raised his face painfully.

Rather than bodily pain, it was the pain in his heart.

And told her.

"They're no longer in this world...!"

"........................?"

Mari was stunned, and looked back at Takeru.

"What do you... mean?"

"Ootori has checked things on you. The facility on the border, it's in the investigation records of Inquisition... Indeed, there was an incident. It has been recorded in it."

"............"

"But... what was discovered at the crime scene, is different from what you remember."

Mari's face was growing more and more animated as she started to understand.

Looking at her face was hard, but he absolutely had to say it.

"What was discovered there was... a body of a woman who seemed like a witch and..................five children... the bodies were burned."

Mari was speechless.

In a loss of words, she shook her head.

"I-it's a lie... because, I've heard their voices. Heard them, on the phone... I've heard their voices speaking to me... I've really heard them!"

"It's the truth... Ootori wouldn't lie about something like this."

"I don't believe it! Because I spoke with the children about the things only they knew, they even called me 'Neeyan' of all things!"

"...Mari."

"No, no, no, no! I don't believe it! Such a thing... I can't believe in something like that!"

Mari tried to deny the truth she was told by Takeru.

Even so, Takeru's words stout-heartedly pierced through her. For the sake of saving Mari... he overlooked her pain.

"If you don't believe it... why don't you ask this person."

Takeru reached Mari using the sword like a cane, and passed by her side.

"Come on——spill it out! Sorcerer!"

Haunted shook his head and sighed.

"When I wondered what are you talking about... it was that huh. I have to refuse, I can't say it was a lie that's why... Nacht, tell Mari the truth."

Haunted instructed the sword in his hand.

Mari didn't understand what he was trying to do. But she realized immediately, that it was all true, the fact that it was all a lie.

《"——Nee—yan you really are naive!"》

《"You shouldn't believe people that easily!"》 《"Neeyan, you always were a softy weren't you. Even before I died, I lied that I caught a cold and had you bring me ice cream."》 《"Neeyan, I luv you."》 《"Always thoughtlessly acting gently and in vain. I'm worried about Neeyan's future."》 《"Neeyan, I want to go to amusement park again."》

Overflowing from the sword were voices of the children she loved. Precious voices she had in her memories. Tears of nostalgia flowed out of her eyes. Dear enough that made her want to embrace them.

To Mari, it was wrecking her. This unexplainable phenomenon, wrecked her.

"Of course, it's only vocal impersonation. It's not real. The memories were extracted from their bodies, and were merely recreated by Nacht."

Haunted shook his head with a smile.

"But it wasn't a lie. I promised that I will definitely let you meet the children."

"…………"

"The children are just dead aren't they?"

"…………"

"I'm a necromancer, right? I can revive the children. It's a simple matter. By the way——the one who killed them, was actually me as well."

As if granting her a blessing, Haunted told her the truth.

Even if she were to sin, she wanted to save them, but she could no longer do that. The memories she had, were a lie. It was all lost already. It was all an illusion. The truth is, that it was all in vain. It was a fact, that meant nothing.

And all the people who died because of Mari,

Died in vain.

"……NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO."

A shriek echoed in the field.

The sorrow of losing someone. The weight of the sin; Mari wanted all of it to end.

Her screams greatly pleased Haunted.

"Aahh, Mari-san you're the best! I wanted to hear that voice from you…! It'll be alright! Please hug the children once again! They might be a little bit cold, but if you warm them up with your body they'll be happy! If necessary I'll prepare even warm bodies for you okay!? Don't worry I've taken their DNA properly! I can clone them or make homunculus, I can completely reproduce their appearance from when they were alive! Recovering their ego would require some soul evocation but It'll be alright! As long as there's love, there's no problem! It doesn't matter if the family is dumb, as long as they're happy! Everyone will bi happi, hih, ihihihiihihihihihiihihihiiihihihiihii."

A scream and a mad laughter resounded.

An exchange between rapture and sorrow, a chaotic banquet continued forever.

The end to despair, didn't come. Mari's was going insane——and there was only one person in that place who could stop it.

A dignified clicking noise sounded, and an azure sword was swung down in front of Mari.

That sword, as if cutting though Mari's despair, was beautiful, graceful, and strong.

"...you didn't do anything wrong."

The owner of the sword said the words that granted salvation.

But it didn't move. Mari's heart didn't move. It couldn't move with just this much.

"Your choice... might have been a mistake but, even if you choose differently, it would also surely be a mistake. Choices made under pressure, are never correct."

"............"

"You made your choice. There's nothing bad about it."

Takeru who was in front of Mari, retracted the blade.

"So who's the bad guy? Who's the worst? That's been decided from the very beginning."

He moved his sword in front or Mari, and pointed with its tip——at Haunted.

"That one laughing over there——It's obviously that shitty Sorcerer!"

Harboring a demon in his mind, Takeru cried out.

His voice reached Mari. She faced down, and wept.

"But... saying I didn't do anything wrong... that's definitely not true."

"If you really think so, I won't say anything."

"I... in the end... couldn't save my family, and caused many innocent people to die..."

"If you want to blame yourself, I won't stop you... however!"

Mari looked at Takeru's back.

His back in the azure-colored armor was very wide.

"If you desire redemption... rather than continuing to blame yourself, use your magic to save the people who are dying in front of you. Wasn't that want you wanted?"

"............"

"You might not forgive yourself; people who died might not forgive you either. But you can definitely atone for that, that's what I think."

He said those words, as if he was reminding himself of the same.

"If that's too much for you. If you're about to collapse under that burden."

"...Take...ru..."

"If it seems like you're about to give up, at that time."

"...Takeru..."

"I will——carry half of it!"

Holding a sword, Takeru fought.

He did so to repay the deaths of the past.

In order to shoulder half of Mari's sins.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style initiate, Kusanagi Takeru. From now on I shall become an Asura ——

———Prepare yourself, Sorcerer!!"

Let's start this battle.

To end the atonement and for the sake salvation, in order to protect.

"Kehi...hihihi...! How shallow,, shallow shallow shallow too shallow! Your words don't resonate within me! Your definition of salvation is just too shallow!"

Haunted had drawn his sword, and took a thrusting stance.

His extended left hand, wriggled as if he was grasping something, his eyeballs were pulsating eerily.

Haunted laughed.

In order to fulfill his desires.

For the sake of hearing agonizing cries of people.

"Very well! Why don't I teach you what is despair!!

———Let's play Witch Hunter!!"

Let's start the despair.

Both of them shouted, expressing their own desires.

Their swords clashed.

The Glossary

Belladonna Garden （ベラドンナガーデン） - It's written as （絶望の庭） meaning "Garden of Despair" .

Number of The Beast (ナンバー・オブ・ザ・ビースト) - Written as (６６６の領域) which means "Area 666".

Chapter 6 - Strength Of Those Who Carry

"Saionji! Hey! Can you hear me? Wake up, Saionji!"

Pushing aside a piece of rubble. Ouka dragged Usagi's out put her body down on the ground, then slapped her.

She was breathing, there was no problem with neither her heart nor lungs.

As for injuries, a fractured left foot, a cut near her left eye. They couldn't be called light injuries, but sustaining just this much injury was a miracle. Fortunately, Ouka only dislocated her shoulder as well.

"How's Usagi? Is she waking up?"

Ikaruga who was on the bench ahead walked towards Ouka while dragging a gun case. She was sitting on a bench with a pained expression, but she only suffered from the cloud of dust.

"No good. There's no response no matter how much I call out to her. It might be... that her head received damage."

A worst case scenario crossed her mind, Ouka bit her lips chagrined.

"Move aside for a sec."

Ikaruga pushed Ouka aside, and leaned towards Usagi's ear.

And with her lips right next to Usagi's ear, she whispered.

"Noo——, it's the useless sniper——. A sniper who always blunders when it counts. Wake up you big breasted potato. A bunny who's only good for her big boobs. Shall you? Shall you? Or shall you not?"

"Hey Suginami... it's not time to play ar——"

After seeing that Ouka tried to stop Ikaruga but,

"Who's a useless sniper———!!!!"

Suddenly, with a loud sound Usagi jumped up completely fine.

"I-i..it hurts, hurts!! Wh- what is it? What happened?"

Usagi suffered from raising her fractured foot and started looking around, raising a pained voice.

Apparently she was alright. Ouka was relieved, and so she switched attitudes immediately.

"Explanations will come later. Also, from now on you guys leave this fight to me."

Right after she told them that she heard a voice from the intercom, she pushed the button on it. After that she clicked several more times, it connected a few seconds later.

《"Hey hey Ouka, Looks like you're safe. Daddy is happy to hear that."》

The one who connected was Sougetsu.

《"How is it on your side? Is Kusanagi-kun working hard? Is the Sorcerer still alive?"》

"Chairman."

《"I also wanted to see it. Whether he properly performs with Lapis or not, I'm kind of anxious about it. Can you tell him to neutralize the Sorcerer-kun without destroying his body? Because the signal doesn't reach to where he is."》

"Chairman——It might be sudden but I'm going to prosecute you."

Hearing Ouka's sudden statement, Sougetsu fell silent.

《"...prosecute? Me, Ouka will?"》

"Yes. I investigated the matter of Nikaido Mari's arrest last night."

《"Investigated? But isn't that matter already over? thats no good, students like you shouldn't go to a crime scene. I don't remember giving a permission for that."》

Ouka ignored his preaching and continued indifferently.

"I passed everything on the site through an analysis-filter, the examination of residual magic found just a few traces of magic. Using Regin facilities I analysed small amount of dust affected, the indexing result of the particle... is weird no matter how you look at it."

《"...hmm."》

"Nikaido Mari's magic power has the ancient attribute of "Aurora". However, the ancient attribute taken from the same samples before was "Despair"."

Ouka narrowed her eyes, and continued to reveal the evidence in order to corner Sougetsu.

"As you probably know, these attributes are not compatible. Dual attribute holders do exist but having "Aurora" and "Despair" is scientifically speaking impossible. What excuse will you make now?"

《"......"》

"In other words, the one who killed the 15th test platoon student that rushed in, was not Nikaido Mari. This is the evidence that says it was an unjust arrest."

《"She's a witch, and a member of Valhalla... is that not enough to arrest her?"》

"Is imposing a false accusation, enough to prosecute someone?"

《"Well then, let's hear it. Who are you going to prosecute? I'm the Inquisition Board's chairman, an existence standing on the top when it comes to laws concerning magic. Who shall judge a someone like me?"》

"Then I will send a report to the Ethics Committee."

Hearing Ouka's words, Sougetsu fell silent again.

"You have allowed the Hero other day to walk freely and you had the students enter the battle against him, now you imposed false charges on a witch, I think Committee will not stay silent."

Even when threatened, he laughed happily.

As if he predicted it, he used a subdued tone of voice from the beginning till end.

"I see... Ouka wants to do business with me? My daughter's in trouble huh? Fine, let's hear it, what kind of favor my cute daughter wants."

Saying it in an unthinkable, roundabout way, Sougetsu asked Ouka.

She closed her eyes, and answered.

"...there's only one thing I want."

Her request surprised Sougetsu quite a bit.

He loudly laughed without thinking.

The first strike with their swords, was evenly matched.

Takeru's diagonal cut to the shoulder and Haunted's thrust cancelled each other.

A shock wave was born and the ground split up with a loud sound. The impact of the blows had nullified each other.

Takeru reversed the blade and attempted an upward diagonal slash from below without losing momentum.

——Take that!

He wasn't convinced, but he was positive as he tried to cut in a shape of half moon at Haunted's neck.

However, his sword met enemy's blade set up for defense.

Kishhiiiiiiiiiiiiii

A unique sound of metal blades hitting each other could be heard.

Haunted's sword bent extremely as he guarded his neck.

The shape of the sword that Haunted was using was close to that of a rapier. Its a slender, western sword that specializes in piercing. Rapiers were originally used for duels and self-defense, they weren't made for combat.

They are easily deformed, since there rather small. It's compatibility should be the worst versus the current form of Mistilteinn which was one that specialized in slashing. Completely parrying it was impossible.

If he tried such a thing, the sword would surely break.

However, The enemy's sword, Dáinsleif, was not broken nor cracked.

Being pounded, making loud noises one after another, Haunted's rapier kept bending one time after another but didn't show signs of breaking.

"——How thoughtless. Your attacks are too honest."

The next moment, Haunted subtracted his hand and parried Takeru's attack.

But it was too violent to be called just a parry.

The moment Haunted parried backwards, Takeru was loudly repelled together with his entire body.

Takeru was blown away behind Haunted, unable to stop the momentum he crashed into the control tower's debris.

Creating a gap by parrying and using enemy's strength against them was swordsmanship basics. However, Haunted's sword bent back which added repulsive force to the parry.

The enemy's swordsmanship was much better than what Takeru expected.

《"Switching from a soft blade into a hard blade seems to have made the repulsive force terrifying. Host, if you're against a Magical Heritage, please throw away common sense of ordinary swords."》

"G-got it... that guy's swordsmanship isn't too bad either."

While spitting blood, Takeru rises up from the rubble.

Haunted without showing the elegance western swordsmanship should have, took a stance while making a distorted thrust.

At the same time, Dáinsleif's blade glittered for a moment.

It wasn't reflecting light. It emitted light by itself.

《"Please be on your guard. It seems to trigger its intrinsic performance."》

Haunted tightly gripped the sword in his right hand, he raised his left hand to his face and gouged his own flesh with fingernails. His canines peaked out from his open mouth and his teeth chattered.

"Annnn.... dnhnhh...graaaaaaaah...!"

He released a thrust at super speed.

Takeru intuitively understood, that it could not be perceived visually.

He triggered Soumatou and the world slowed down.

Even with this——it's fast!

Immediately after he rolled away, Haunted's thrust exploded.

The control tower's rubble was blown off, resulting in a huge hole.

"Lapis, block the hole in the lung with armor or something!"

《"It's possible, but it will cause intense pain. Will you withsta——"》

"I can withstand pain...! It's lack of air that's a problem...!"

《"Understood."》

Right after Lapis confirmed it, the hole in Takeru's chest healed up with a *pikipiki* noise, it looked as if the armor eroded the body.

"Ugh...gah"

Takeru was hit by a wave of tremendous pain.

He could breathe again, but there was no time to rest.

Haunted was coming with another thrust.

"Guh..."

"Ihi... ihihihihi! Kishishishishi!!"

He made continuous thrusts as he laughed.

Even though he triggered Soumatou, their speed was extraordinary. While Takeru avoided them somehow, he was being pushed further and further back.

"It seems like your trump card is to accelerate your brain processing speed, but that kind of thing is easy for me, since I know everything about the human body! What a shame, Witch Hunter!"

"How dare you Sorcerer...!"

"Don't think too highly of yourself for being able to accelerate without magic! You're mistaken if you think you can match a sorcerer because of that, how ridiculous!"

Being insulted, although he prevented blood from rushing up to his head, anger could be seen in Takeru's expression.

But there was something in his words. His swordsmanship wasn't just a bluff. The accuracy and speed of his thrusts was faster than Takeru's.

"Raahh——!"

Takeru moved forward while in pain, and he held out his sword to the side.

Haunted avoided it by jumping backwards.

Got him. He can do it. If it goes on like this, he'll hit him with a counter-attack.

Takeru tried to hit Haunted's chest by sliding at high speed.

That moment.

The space Takeru rammed into, was empty. The moment Takeru jumped with his shoulder first.

Suddenly, Takeru's right shoulder was torn up and started bleeding.

"Guahh!!"

Not knowing what happened, his body staggered to the left.

Then, it was Takeru's left elbow that was torn up, blood started flowing the same way as his shoulder wound's.

"Wh-what's happening... nghh!"

Every time he staggered, Takeru's body was cut.

Takeru rapidly drew back, and Haunted's form materialized suddenly.

A gap was made between them, and he stood like that for a moment.

"What is it? Aren't you coming at me? Come, dash straight into me in high spirits."

Haunted with space to spare, looked down on Takeru.

With that gap, it was the first time Takeru felt uncomfortable.

《"...it can't be."》

"What's going on...!"

《"Host. I will paste the analysis-filter results into your retina."》

After he was told that by Lapis,Takeru's view turned slightly bluish.

The thing that wasn't visible until now, became visible.

Between Takeru and Haunted, something, something like red needles floated in the air in large quantities.

"Looks like the intrinsic performance of Dáinsleif' is to have the residue of a thrust remain in the air after the thrust was made."

Takeru understood and clicked his tongue.

Certainly, the place Takeru jumped at before was one that Haunted thrust at. When he was with Mari, he jumped at invisible residual thrust.

After being hit by the bonus slashes, the healing capabilities weren't there. The wound on elbow and shoulder were still bleeding.

"Oho! It's been exposed! It's a quite wonderful Relic Eater! I want it more and more!"

《"............"》

"Jealous, Nacht?"

《"I'll kill you."》

Hearing Haunted say something hilarious like that in middle of combat, Takeru felt anger towards him.

As if he felt Takeru was too weak for him, and his strike didn't come.

《"...it's quite an outstanding Magical Heritage. It's intrinsic magic is enough to become a threat to me."》

Suddenly, Lapis said in his head.

Usually monotone voice of Lapis, sounded a bit unusual.

"...Lapis?"

《"I hate it. I deserve certain death for allowing my host to be hit by the residue of a thrust."》

Could it be, that she was in a bad mood.

Lapis whom you couldn't guess what was she thinking of, was actually angry.

《"Host, have you forgotten my performance?"》

"...performance?"

《"I mentioned before that I am first class goods when it comes to countering magic. Those thrusts, that residual magic so to speak. You can clear it all out."》

Lapis continued to advise Takeru.

《"Also, there's a perfect solution against that man's parrying. Host, I can change into any type of sword. It will not make that degraded product go all limp anymore."》

She was displeased after all. He caught on the points he was advised by Lapis.

"A sword receiving the flow...? I see!"

Takeru stood up and looked at Lapis apologetically.

"Sorry... for being such a stupid host."

《"The one who chose the Host is me. The only one who can use me is the Host. I compensate for the parts host is missing, and Host compensates for the parts I am missing. That's how the weapon and the owner are, is what I think."》

"..........."

《"Please rely on my performance more."》

Incredibly surprised, he didn't think he would hear those words from Lapis. He scratched his cheek happily and grasped her tightly.

"If that's the case——I'll rely on you with all I have!"

Declaring that with confidence, he charged at Haunted.

He cleaved the residual thrusts, as he went straight at him.

Haunted took a posture for intercepting with a smile on his face.

Takeru released a single cut with his sword.

"No tricks again."

Haunted received the blow with his sword again.

**gigigigigi*, the rapier receiving his blow bent again, and by using the repulsive force of the attack Haunted tried to counter——at that moment.

"——Lapis! Kodachi!"

Takeru's nodachi changed it's shape in an instant.

The blade of the nodachi that bended Haunted's sword abruptly disappeared.

"?!"

The sword's body changed shape and shortened, disappearing. The nodachi's blade was 150cm long, and the blade of the kodachi was 60cm long. After 90 cm of he blade disappeared, Haunted's sword lost the force that was pushing it and a place to hit, fanning the air.

And——a sound of slashing could be heard.

"Gu...geh..."

With his chest cut, Haunted stepped back.

Despite being hit, he still had a smile on his face.

"Ufu, ufufufu... I see, you've put some thought into it."

《"Using a shape change... to nullify the parry... how annoying, that azure one."》

A laughing Haunted, and a surprised Nacht.

Takeru didn't stop. He readied his sword.

"Next! Two-handed sword!"

Sword changed it's shape again, forming a huge two handed sword.

Haunted wasn't an idiot. He prepared his next residual slashes immediately.

However, the residuals were useless against Lapis's blade. They were not that scary when they could be seen.

After slashing one time after another, he swung down the blade at Haunted.

Haunted lowered his defense in advance, and poised to accommodate the shape change.

However, Takeru's blow slammed in, and cut from Haunted's shoulder to chest without changing shape.

Intentionally using a decapitating strike without changing shape. Although it was a simple feint, it was a blow that drew the most out of Lapis's characteristics.

Tremendous amounts of blood spilled from Haunted's body.

"Gebohh...kuha...hahahahaha! Not bad! It's gotten a bit more fun!"

As his sworn enemy was still laughing, Takeru felt his creepiness.

Why he had made a gap. The reason, has already appeared on Haunted's body.

《"Host, enemy is healing at extremely high speed. Follow up fast."》

"I won't let you recover!"

It was one-sided for Takeru from that moment onward.

He changed the shape of his sword after every attack, and continuously dealt blows to the enemy.

Uchigatana. Claymore. Gladius. Falchion. Kunai. Flamberge. Seiryuutou. Shotel. Kukri. Ring Dagger. Warabitetou.

There was no sword that's not included in Kusanagi style teachings. Ever since the child was born, the art of swordsmanship was imprinted in its body.

Rotating his body, his sword danced wildly without stopping the momentum. Repeatedly accelerating he overwhelms Haunted like a storm.

It seemed like a very beautiful dance.

Haunted's body kept getting cut to shreds, and its regeneration couldn't keep up.

"Zweihander!"

The largest sword there was, an extra large two-handed sword, zweihander.

Takeru raised it high up, to next swing it down on Haunted's brain.

It will end with this. And it will be a next step to Mari's salvation.

With all of his heart and soul, Takeru hit the strongest blow fueled by his anger.

——At that moment.

"——Hihihii."

zugyuru......

Below Haunted's feet, a shadow appeared.

Out of the shadow, something shot towards Takeru together with thorns.

"——Wha..."

It was Yoshimizu Akira who was supposed to be dead.

Yoshimizu's body was ejected from the shadow, straight at Takeru. She had an unfocused face not knowing what happened. Why was she here, why was Takeru in front of her, without knowing that.

Takeru let go of the sword for a moment, and held Yoshimizu's chest.

"Gyahaha, gyahahahaha! You really are something, to empathize with a clone!"

Haunted's loud laughter echoed.

Even though he knew it now, it was too late. The only thing he could do was to face away from Haunted as he held Yoshimizu.

That's when he was slashed.

Takeru's large back was torn up, and he was blown far away.

"...sh...it......bast...ard..."

As he cursed, a large amount of blood flowed from his back.

Takeru could no longer move. He confirmed Yoshmizu's... clone's safety, and sank into the mountain of rubble.

"Boy, this is what you call a fight. It's not a place for playing fair and square. You take advantage of psychology and emotions of the opponent, and cleverly land your blows. You are too soft. Even though the original of that girl has already left this world, you only helped a stupid doll. Really, this is why humans are so interesting. That's why I love them, haha, uhi...uhiihihihihihihihihi."

Haunted scooped up his hair while laughing loudly.

Takeru tried to stand up as he listened to his laughter.

《"Host, you're at your activity limit. Any more and..."》

"......harden...the wounds..."

《"......that's too reckless."》

"If I'm not... reckless here... all will be... lost... I won't... save anything..."

Takeru's heart reached her, and Lapis's plugged the wounds with armour in silence.

However, no matter what, it seemed like Takeru already lost.

Mari saw everything.

She saw Takeru fight desperately. His figure struggling. His strength. She saw everything.

Right now, Takeru was in middle of the rubble and tried to stand again.

But Mari as well, wiped her tears and stood up from the ground.

『"If you desire redemption... rather than continuing to blame yourself, use your magic to save the people."』

Remembering Takeru's words. The words carved into her heart, she remembered them.

Her consciousness came back, she was no longer in daze. Pupils that lost their light, once again lit up.

...the thing that....I can do...

What she could do, there was only one thing.

That was——magic.

There was no other choice for Mari. The magic she learned from the Chairman, is all that Mari had.

Magic that heals wounds, magic that restores the mind, magic that relieves the pain, magic intended for defense.

The magic Mari was bad at and didn't want to learn, the magic the Chairman who was her adoptive mother taught her without giving up.

And the one she was taught the very last, attack magic.

『"Listen Mari. Use this magic only when you need to protect a person that's important to you."』

Mari betrayed those words, she hurt people. Twice, she couldn't protect her promise.

"But, I won't make any more mistakes."

She lifted her hand, and aimed her fingertips at loudly laughing Haunted.

"This time... I'll save him."

To repay the people whom she couldn't save, it was the first step.

In order to protect her important person, she'll use this magic.

To save this person who burdens half of her sins, she'll use it.

Device attached to Mari's neck, wasn't a normal Gleipnir. It was one that's not supposed to be originally used, a type that causes an explosion. In other words, it explodes in response to magic from phantom instrument. Sougetsu, in case Mari tried to use magic or was taken away by Valhalla, put this collar on her. Her lost memory also told her that making a normal Gleipnir that seals magic of a witch as powerful as Mari was too costly. It was unthinkable to use a normal one in such case.

It was a gamble, but if Takeru could live a single second longer at cost of her own life, she was willing to do it.

In order not to involve Takeru, she couldn't use overly flashy magic. She aimed at one point, a perfectly straight line.

There was enough magic power. She remembered the operative procedure. Fast emergence of the magical circle was also perfect.

She built the operative procedure in her head, envisioned the magic in her head, and completed the chant in her brain.

She suppressed activation of it. And finally, after she had everything she required,

Before the collar could explode, she'll prove that she can take Haunted down.

"This will be my last spell...!!"

She opened her eyes in order to shoot her last spell.

She concentrated on her fingertips, as if they were a gun.

"Pierce him!! "Aurora Bullet"!"

At that moment, a supreme bullet that enclosed all of this world's light was released.

A concentrated seven-colored light.

Ancient magic, "Aurora Bullet".

The unstoppable arrow of destruction flew straight at Haunted's head——

——Just before he was pierced, Haunted lit up and dodged it.

"Isn't that a terrible surprise, Mari-san? It's no wonder if you'll get exposed if you release that much killing intent."

Haunted smiled gently.

Combat experience, is what he meant. That was the crucial difference between Mari and Haunted. In addition to that he had the same capabilities as Takeru's Soumatou. Avoiding Mari attacks was an easy thing to him.

That's how her enemy was.

Seeing him avoid it, Mari was at a loss for words, she clenched her teeth, chagrined.

She gently closed her eyes, but the expected end did not come.

"..?"

She touched the collar to check. It was certainly attached to her neck, but nothing in particular was happening.

A question mark appeared above her head, wondering why didn't the end come.

"Don't worry——that collar will not explode."

A youthful voice sounded from behind.

After she turned around, she saw a figure standing on top of the rubble.

On top of the collapsed control tower's wall, there stood a girl with sunset-colored hair that had a gun and a shield made out of blue crystal.

The girl was——Ootori Ouka, as their eyes met, Ouka leaped from the rubble and landed near Mari.

"You... why..."

"I intimidated the chairman to release the explosion-type Gleipnir. I used the false evidence that you were charged with."

Ouka said something unbelievable after suddenly appearing causing Mari to stand in daze. Why did that woman do such a thing for her? Even though she hated her so much...

"It's not for your sake. I did it to help Kusanagi."

Ouka glared at Haunted and set up her shield.

"You told me before, that magic can also save people."

"............"

"In that case, show it to me. Prove that magic isn't there only to hurt people."

"............"

"If you don't, I will never acknowledge it."

"Hmph," Ouka said those words as if she was disgusted.

Mari opened her eyes hearing Ouka domineering speech, and thought.

Yeah... this woman is really——annoying.

What is she thinking? Who does she think she is? She suddenly appears, and asks her to use healing magic? Who the hell is she to ask her something like that? It can't do anything but hurt people? That's a horrible insult! Who does she think she is to come in like that without explanation? What the hell? Did she think she looked cool appearing by standing on top of the rubble? Is she an idiot?! It wasn't cool at all! I think it wasn't cool in the least. I'm not going to fawn over her just because she saved me from a pinch!

Thanks to the strange emotions surfacing within her, Mari noticed that negative emotions like sadness were blown away.

"What the, bossing me around. You can't do anything yourself and want to rely on me, huh?"

"...don't get full of yourself. The one to release the collar in the first place was me."

"I-I didn't ask you to. Also you told me it wasn't for my sake."

"Such an insolent mouth... don't you want to help Kusanagi?"

"I want to help, and I will help him. But I'm annoyed by your attitude!"

For some reason, the two of them started to argue.

Even though they had the same goal, they repelled each other like magnets.

"Oh-ho! This time it's a quite pretty visitor. That makes me really happy. You really have beautiful hair... I want to decorate my room with it."

Haunted declared eerily, as he walked towards them.

Mari stopped bickering, and crouched with a hand on the ground.

"Killing him is not an easy task. Even decapitated, or with his heart pierced he regenerates. You need power strong enough to turn him into ash."

"Hmph. Can you do it?"

"Don't look down on me. If it's the power, my magic will not lose to anyone. I could even destroy his soul."

The moment Mari closed her eyes, a huge magical circle appeared on the ground.

Seven colors flowing, these colors symbolized the ancient magic of "Aurora".

"The problem is, that it can take a while to activate. That's your job, until I complete it I need you to buy time... you won't say you can't do that will you?"

"Having to wipe your ass as you cast your lazy magic is extremely annoying, but it's not like I can't do it. It's fine if you prepare your operative procedure slowly."

They made arrangements in middle of their cat fight, Ouka poised her shield while standing in front of Mari.

The two of them prepared to fight, and devoted themselves to their tasks.

"Let me tell you this, we only cooperate because we have the same goal."

"Indeed. This is all, for the sake of Takeru who tried to save me."

"Oh, that's right. It's all your fault, Kusanagi was hurt because of you."

"That's why definitely——"

"That is why I'm absolutely——"

Mari's magic shined even more brightly, Ouka with shield in one hand, slid out pins from the three grenades she had at her waist.

And,

"——I'm not doing it for your sake!!"

"——Not doing it for you!!

That's how the united front of the two that had the worst compatibility began.

At the same time that Ouka pulled out the safety pins from the three grenades, she threw them into the sky.

The grenades made a big arc, and exploded in the air.

It had nothing to do with damaging the enemy. The instant they exploded, scarlet dust danced in the field.

"...Magic Chaff."

Haunted muttered seeing the dust floating in the air.

It literally meant that the dust caused the magic to diminish. Various anti-magic materials were used as its content, obviously there was adamantium and mithril, but also a wide range of other materials like damascan steel and orichalcum.

And, the grenades Ouka has thrown were made by Ikaruga. The anti-magic material used was ——

《"! ...It's hihiirokane!! A hateful anti-magic material that pollutes organism-based attributes the most!! To use such a rare thing in a chaff... what kind of idiot...!!?"》

Nacht panicked. Of course, it's producer was the Regin of Small Fry Platoon.

Haunted tried to expand "Belladonna Garden" from his fingertip to try, but the thorn that extended had returned to his finger with a high-pitched squeal.

"I see. In that case——what about this?!"

swish, just as she heard a sound of wind being cut through, Ouka lost the sight of Haunted.

Disappeared——no, wrong. Ouka spread her legs instantly.

———**diiiiiiiiiinggg!**

At the same time a metallic sound filled the air, shock hit Ouka's body.

Haunted was in front of her while sticking out the sharp point of Dáinsleif. However, it didn't reach Ouka.

The shield Ouka was equipped with, was similar to the riot shields security guards used. The blue semi-transparent shield stopped the blow.

《"Tch——this time it's the blue crystal! You must be kidding me! This material, it shouldn't have been used outside of alchemist's experiments!"》

Nacht started to fret even further.

The blue crystal, among the modern anti-magic defence-oriented materials was the rarest one. It's anti-magic defence is of the highest class, and it absorbs the shock to the extent no metal can.

But this rare metal is normally unobtainable.

Even if you have contact with higher-ups, it's almost impossible.

A shield and magic chaff, that's what Ouka asked Ikaruga to prepare.

Ikaruga lent her the equipment without asking about the circumstances.

That Suginami... just how on earth did she get this. Obtaining gold was technically possible, but...

She still had many questions, but it was great equipment for this situation. Withstanding a blow from Dáinsleif, aside from Magical Heritage's, the only thing that could do that was the blue crystal.

However, even that. Even that——won't last long.

《"Making fun of us...! Haunted, get serious! I'm in a terribly bad mood!"》

"Don't cry because a shield that's not a Magical Heritage that stopped you, Nacht."

《"I-I'm not crying!"》

"Be more confident. You're the best Magical Heritage there is for me."

Saying that, Haunted continuously delivered blows towards Ouka who was standing in front of him.

"——Guhh!"

Even though the shield had excellent shock absorption, the shock that Ouka felt was still comparable to the one caused by a traffic accident. Her body was blown away many times, causing her to stagger.

Without the shield, Ouka would have been sent flying with a single hit. Probably, Haunted's hits were equal to those of a tank's. His strength was similar to the one Takeru had in his witch hunter form, thought Ouka.

She couldn't avoid, not until Mari's operative procedure was completed.

"Hmm, I'm getting a bit tired of this. You've got pretty good reflexes, but it's not interesting if all you do is defend yourself."

While thrusting continuously, Haunted complained.

"Well then, it's about time——"

Ouka couldn't move for. Her arms were numb and close to their limit.

"——We hear you scream."

It continued the next moment.

Haunted's voice——was heard from behind.

It was high-speed movement, the same as Takeru's Soumatou. As expected, Ouka couldn't match it.

She attempted to defend her back, but Haunted already thrust his sword.

The edge of the blade was next to Ouka's breast.

No good, it's unavoidable.

Just as Ouka gave up and closed her eyes.

Haunted's temple was hit by a bullet of aurora-colored light.

Although she didn't know what happened, Ouka didn't miss the chance. She pulled the gun from her waist and showered the staggering Haunted with bullets.

It was a large caliber handgun. An evolution of the Desert Eagle gun that was made before the war. A gun Ikaruga probably made for fun, it had recoil strong enough to blow an arm off.

Its power was incredible. Although it wasn't enough to shoot through Haunted's armor, but it was enough to blow him away.

Haunted was blown away without a sound and rolled on the ground.

The light bullet that struck him in the beginning, was floating around Ouka emitting low noise. And not only one, but four mysterious bullets were there, as if guarding Ouka.

"Geez... really a woman who makes trouble for others."

Mari who was building up an operative procedure in a magic circle, let out a pained voice.

Looking closely, in front of Mari's eyes were four small three-dimensional magical circles. Ouka finally understood that those light bullets were made by Mari.

Mari laughed fearlessly at Haunted while sweating.

""Will-o'-Wisp"... a contract summoning magic. Normally they're just fast moving demon lights. But after they attach themselves to the contractor... they change their attribute to same as their owner's."

Haunted's temple had fallen in, his skull had collapsed and was distorted irregularly.

"My magic power... hurts quite a lot!"

Mari laughed after delivering a serious blow.

However, her complexion became pale, and a droplet of red dripped from her nose.

Simultaneous spell usage, is a very advanced magical technique for witches. And Mari performed "Will-o'-Wisp" together with another large magic. It couldn't succeed unless she maintained the highest level of concentration, it's the highest difficulty stuff. An ordinary witch could fail building the operative procedure and be killed by the recoil.

Mari risked combining "Will-o'-Wisp" with her big spell.

"...doing unnecessary things..."

Ouka made a face that looked like she was uncomfortable, and stood between Mari and Haunted.

"I told you... I'm not doing this for you...!"

Mari responded to Ouka sarcastically.

Their enemy, fixed himself soundly restoring his head to normal and laughed happily. It should be a mortal wound, no matter how they looked at it, that guy was a monster.

"It's unbearable, the two of you. It looks like I'll enjoy it. You're a very good combination, ufufuhihihihi."

Being complimented by Haunted, their cheeks started convulsing.

And both of them together,

""That doesn't make me happy at all!""

Both of them responded with hatred at the same time.

Haunted's onslaught and Ouka's defense started again.

Mari supported Ouka with "Will-o'-Wisp", allowing her to barely maintain the balance.

"...ngh."

It takes time to activate the large and complex operative procedure that Mari was creating, and its power was accordingly great...

Will she be able to hit Haunted with it?

That was Mari's only concern. His increased reaction speed allowed him to avoid even the "Aurora Bullet" which moved at the speed of light.

Will she be able to apply such a large magic at the target that fast.

Mari didn't control the "Will-o'-Wisp" manually. The magical organisms responded automatically.

And it was just barely keeping up with that villain's speed.

Whether the large magic Mari was trying to cast would hit or not depended completely on Mari's aim and timing.

If she misses, it's all over.

Feeling slightly uncertain, her concentration was disturbed.

《"—...Mari, can you hear me?"》

That's when she heard a voice in her head. It was communication through magic resonance.

She looked far away to the end of the field.

And she saw Takeru trying to get up with his body all covered in blood.

《"...Takeru?"》

《"Yeah. I asked Lapis to let me talk with you."》

《"You shouldn't move! Try to live through it! I-I still haven't..."》

《"There's no time. Listen to what I have to say."》

After cutting in the middle of Mari's sentence, Takeru said something outrageous.

《"When that guy is in position aligned with mine, fire that magic towards me."》

《"Wha.... what are you saying?!"》

《"I want you to put all of your magic in it, and shoot it at me."》

《"I don't get it! What do you mean——"》

《"Believe in me. I will definitely accept your feelings."》

Hearing him say it with all seriousness, Mari's face reddened.

She blushed after being captured by another meaning of what he said.

She was convinced that Takeru still intended to fight, it seemed like he didn't intend to give up on winning it.

《"...I get it. I don't know what you intend to do, but if you die I won't forgive you!"》

Takeru's wry smile seemed to be inconsistent with her demand, and the communication was cut.

Just as she was requested to, Mari decided to put all of her magic in it.

In front of her, the defensive line of Ouka and "Will-o'-Wisp" continued to stand.

However, the number of "Will-o'-Wisps" was already reduced to two.

They were probably slain with Dáinsleif. Magical organism don't really die, but she couldn't afford to re-summon them now.

Ouka's shield was already approaching its limit. There were many cracks looking like bullet holes in it, breaking it was only a matter of time.

"Just a little more...!"

Mari, while feeling impatient, steadily built up the operative procedure.

Just one more step. Just a little more.

Just 10 seconds more until it activates.

———*binnnnnnnngg*

Ouka's shield broke.

"———!!"

Mari and Ouka shivered. Haunted performed a thrust with an insane smile.

Make it in time! Make it in time!

The two of them shouted in their thoughts at the same time.

I don't want to die after coming this far. I don't want it to end here.

It doesn't matter if it's unsightly. It's fine if it is unsightly. I don't want it to end here.

Ouka and Mari prayed to god.

——That wish, apparently has reached him.

"Gah——?!!"

It wasn't that magic made it in time.

A dreadful bombardment from afar hit Haunted's belly.

The bombardment——no, A snipe powerful enough to crack the Hero's armor that was created from magic power.

"——Saionji?!"

She called out the name into the intercom.

Then, she heard Usagi take a deep breath.

《"...One of my eyes was injured. I was too afraid to shoot until now... I'm sorry."》

"No, I'm fine thanks to you! I really owe you!"

Ouka very happily thanked Usagi.

Haunted's elbow was blown off, even though he was hit by a sniper he rebuilt his posture withstanding the shock.

"You're really good aren't you guys! I really love you! By all means, I want to kill you and make you mine!"

With an eerie, mad smile, Haunted cried out his hopes.

But, however.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. You have underestimated us too much——It will be over with this!"

Just as the cold voice resounded, Ouka that defended the spot, jumped away from it.

【"With the blessing of a Goddess's of Dawn, I become one who embodies the divine will. The end of knowledge and creativity brings about dazzling demise. Ultimate light opens up the heavenly gates——and entices that person to step in nothingness!"】

The trigger activating the magic, was the incantation recited just now.

With emotions she couldn't suppress, Mari walked towards Haunted with her hands joined together.

Towards the hateful enemy. Towards the ringleader behind all of it.

The pinnacle of destructive power, the strongest magic, now——

"This is everything I have! Receive itttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt!!"

——She released it.

The ground was crushed, the air screamed, a wave of magic stirred up the field.

Suddenly in front of Mari, a glittering gate appeared.

That gate, according to Mari's words vigorously opened up, and like a particle cannon an aurora-colored light was released from it.

The "Aurora Gate", magic that destroyed the world during the Witch Hunt War, destroying aircraft carriers, battleships, ancient magic with the power of a bomber plane that sunk everything with a single blow.

That light flew straight ahead——

"Hahaha, it may look flashy, but it's nothing if it doesn't hit!"

Haunted avoided the light particle cannon, and mocked Mari as he moved around her many times.

"Was it close? A little bit more and it would have reached. If I was just grazed by that, half of my body would be blown off. It's a wonderful magic, let's train together in Valhalla from now on!"

Turning a deaf ear to Haunted's mockery, Mari continued to shoot the magic in straight line until exhaustion.

And after the magic ran out, she fell to the ground.

After she released everything, she had no strength at all left.

"That's no good, Mari-san. Running out of magic during battle is a suicide."

"Ha... ha...."

"Now then, after we come back home from the frontier let's study! Don't worry! I don't do anything obscene to my students! Platonic torture is my motto!"

"Ufu, ufufufufu."

Haunted stood in front of Mari while laughing.

He reached out to Mari who has released everything.

Just as he tried to touch her cheek, at that moment.

"——I've received your everything."

A voice sounded from behind.

For the first time Haunted felt chills run down his spine.

Suddenly, after looking back, he saw Takeru with wounds all over his body lifting up a sword.

Takeru subtracted the right side of his body, making a stance for a thrust.

With a disappointed expression, Haunted sighed.

"Being unable to give up is bad. Honestly, I'm bored of you. Playing with guys is not my hobby."

Haunted pulled the right side of his body as well, and poised for a thrust.

"Nacht——intrinsic magic."

A black magic circle appeared beneath Haunted's feet after his instruction.

"Rejoice, Witch Hunter. Eating this thing, you're the second one."

With a familiar stance, Haunted sneered at Takeru.

【"Too late do you offer to make peace with me——for now I have drawn the sword Dáinsleif."】

An innocent, eerie voice spoke departing words in the language of the soul.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style——"

Takeru standing on the other side sharpened his stance.

He systematically contracted all of his body like a spring. Achilles tendon, calves, thighs, waist, arms, shoulders, neck. And put strength into every muscle, he even twisted his bones to produce instantaneous power. He twisted his wrists that were gripping the sword like a screw.

Bones throughout his body creaked, the muscles in his body screamed.

And at the same time, both the skill and magic were released.

"———Unicorn's Destructive Lance!!"

【"———Berserk Enchantment."】

Both of them launched their thrusts.

Takeru triggered Soumatou at the same time as he released the power in his body, leaving the world behind.

Accelerate, accelerate, accelerate——

With his whole body speeding up, faster——

Takeru's thrust reached the limit of speed and crashed into Haunted's thrust.

Originally the thrusts shouldn't meet, there shouldn't be any collision.

However, the two swords were thrust at each other head-on, desiring for them to collide.

At the moment they collided, effect of Dáinsleif's intrinsic magic appeared.

From its blade, irregular distorted magic with black and red mixed suddenly overflowed.

That was Dáinsleif's intrinsic magic, "Berserk Enchantment".

The powerful enchantment not only resulted with destruction, the dark magic polluted the owner's spirit and strengthened the body until transcendence. When the magic is invoked, the body of the owner is pushed forward at cost of both magic and life in order to strike a single blow. The owner's mentality turns into that of a beast seeking gushing blood, losing all reason and thinking.

"ASEIQRNZXCASDGSDCVZXcQWEASDAGCSUIREQ"

Haunted became a monster that only looked to pierce someone. Takeru inside of the accelerated world stretched himself to push back that blow.

《"That's amazing. To withstand intrinsic magic with a skill. I don't think there is any other swordsman like you in this modern era. I don't think there was one in the past either."》

Together as shock wave and magic hit, he heard Nacht's voice echo in his head.

《"But it's useless. You can't win against me using such a blunt thing."》

Takeru protested against Nacht's one-sided proclamation.

He showed a glimpse of his canines——and laughed fearlessly.

《"—Twilight Enchantment——Enchantment reversal, flexible material release."》

Under Nacht's voice, Lapis's voice reached him.

At that moment, aurora-colored magic raged from Lapis' blade. Gentle like the light reflected on water's surface, fierce like a star's demise, as beautiful as the illusion reflected in the sky of the far north, the emitted particles hit Dáinsleif's blade.

It was the same power Mari has released and was proud of, the "Aurora Gate".

《"That's... Mari's magic!?"》

《"My intrinsic magic is different from your barbaric enchantment, I absorb magic. Your master didn't really use magic, so I was allowed to borrow magic from one of Host's friends."》

《"...impossible! It's a powerful magic that was released from just five fingers because of it's destructive power! There's no way to absorb such a thing!"》

《"It may be impossible for you, but it is possible for me. I can release it without converting it to my own magic power. That way I can take in greater amount of magic power."》

《"...!! You bitchhhh!!"》

Takeru's thrust started to push back Haunted's.

《"I will return the words you previously said in all of their entirety. A pervert and a dull object like you cannot defeat me and my Host."》

Indifferently, condescending as if she looked down on them from above, Lapis declared.

Confidently, pridefully,

Lapis said the final words to the loser.

《"It's obvious. Because me and my Host are the strongest."》

Responding to her declaration, Takeru roared.

"Zeahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

There was no one who could stand against this strike.

Even if there were two Nacht's——no, even if she had power of three of them they would be pushed back and blown away.

The thrust put everything to avenge the people who regrettably became victims, and pierced through his heart.

Takeru used up almost all of his physical strength, and stood in a state where he already passed his limit long ago.

Because his consciousness was slightly fading, he checked the status.

He looked at his sword that pierced through Haunted's heart firmly up to the base.

"Haa... haa... I-I won."

He wanted to make a suitable expression to celebrate victory, but the muscles on his face didn't move properly.

Haunted was charred from the place he was pierced, his entire body started to become ash affected by Mari's magic.

He's dead. There's no way he survived that.

Thinking that, the moment he wanted to fall down on his back.

Haunted suddenly started moving, with a sword pierced through his heart, he looked at Takeru's face.

"Y-you must be... kidding...?!"

Takeru was speechless seeing this. Even though his heart was pierced. Even though he cannot function like a human anymore. Even though he was crumbling and turning into ash.

Why, why is he still alive.

Haunted's burned face made a different kind of smile than his insane smile from before and said.

"——Boy, your name?"

His voice, unlike the one he used previously, was serious.

Takeru glared at Haunted who was still alive with hatred.

"Kusanagi... Takeru."

"Kusanagi...? I see. From that demon hunting clan."

"...! You bastard, what do you know about my house."

A laughter sounded from Haunted's throat, his teeth peeked out.

"I'll remember you, Kusanagi Takeru-kun. I won't forget this amazing fight."

Immediately after that Takeru gasped, his legs went limp.

《"Host, please get away."》

Just as he was instructed, he pulled out the sword and distanced himself from Haunted.

At the location they were at just now, the same thing that appeared from Yoshimizu's body, something like a black swamp emerged.

Haunted sank into that swamp as it made a loud watery sound.

At the same time, he completely disappeared, "fuhh", power left Takeru's body and he fell forward as he stood hitting the ground.

Takeru on the verge of losing consciousness continued to repeat Haunted's words in his head.

Demon-hunting clan... Kusanagi.

It was something practically no one knew in modern times, a piece of fairy tale passed around.

"Takeru... Takeru..."

When his consciousness returned urged by the voice, the sky was already coloured with sunset.

Takeru looked towards the source of the voice.

"...Ma...ri."

Barely being able to leak a voice, Takeru moaned.

Mari not worried, smiled gently towards him.

"Takeru... thank you."

"..........."

"Thanks to you being there... I will no longer make any mistakes."

Mari's figure dyed in the colour of sunset, somehow looked transient.

As if she was to go far away any moment...

"What Takeru told me before... I will never forget it."

"...Ma......ri."

"No matter where I am... even in pitch black darkness... I won't forget."

Takeru tried to reach Mari.

He attempted to lift his creeping right hand, but he had no strength.

Running from behind, another person's shadow appeared behind Mari.

"——Nikaido Mari. I will arrest you for the unauthorized usage of magic."

He heard a voice of an Inquisitor.

Mari had multiple handcuffs and collars put on by them.

......no......

Takeru reached out desperately.

...don't take her away...

His desperately stretched out hand didn't feel any pain.

"...Mari...!"

He put all the strength he had in his body and shouted, Mari looked back once.

Mari with tears in her eyes, gave him a sad smile.

And,

"I, I'm really happy that I met you!"

Cheerfully and in tears, she said those words of farewell to Takeru. Pushed from behind by Inquisitor, Mari moved forward again.

Takeru with his misty vision looked at her figure that moved away.

His vision dimmed, and his hand fell to the ground.

Takeru's consciousness fell into abyss, while single-mindedly calling Mari's name.

The Glossary

Aurora Bullet （アウローラ・バレツト） - It's written as (極光の鏃) meaning Auroral Arrowhead.

Will-o'-Wisp (ウイル・オ・ウイスプ) - It's written as (愚者の火) meaning Fool's Flame.

Aurora Gate （アウローラ・ゲート） - It's written as (光の到達点) meaning Light Convergence.

Thou hast made this offer over-late, if thou wouldst make peace——for now I have drawn Dáinsleif (Too late do you offer to make peace with me——for now I have drawn the sword Dainsleif) - A reference to Norse Mythology's King Hogni, slightly modified what was originally written in the novel to make it closer to original (as written on wikipedia). In kanji it's written as (許しを請うのが遅すぎた——最早私は解き放たれている) which means

"It's too late to beg now——I have been already unleashed".

Berserk Enchant (ベルセルク・エンチヤント) - It's written as (ヒャズニングの血戦) which means Hjaðningavíg's Bloodbath and is a reference to Norse mythology's legend.

Epilogue

One week later.

Takeru stared blankly out the window from his bed, it was a beautiful afternoon.

After Mari was taken away by Inquisition, Takeru was carried on a stretcher to Seelie. He was taken to the intensive care unit accompanied by Hayato and the members of Small Fry Platoon.

The Seelie said that although he stood no chance with that much blood loss, the wounds were already closed when he was taken in.

He thought it was reproduced by Lapis at that time, but apparently it was different.

After Takeru fell, it seems like Mari took care of his wounds using her magic.

It seems like Ouka stopped Inquisitors from arresting her until she was done with Takeru's treatment, when they said words of farewell, Inquisitors were already pointing a gun at Mari.

...Mari was then imprisoned in the in deepest part of the forbidden area.

He didn't know what happened after that.

"Host."

He suddenly removed his gaze from the window, Lapis sat down on a round chair and peeled an apple.

"Apple."

Lapis brought a fork to his mouth while saying "Nn".

"...is this an apple?"

"Is this not an apple?"

"There's nothing left of it but the core, is there?"

"But, it is an apple."

Takeru looked in her eyes, because Lapis held out the apple's core expressionlessly, he had no choice but to say "Aan" and eat it.

"Is it tasty?"

"...yeah."

"...? Is it tasty?"

"Hey, why did you go 'eh a lie' just now? Why did you repeat with such a nuance?"

"I see, it was delicious. That's good."

Lapis decided that on her own, and started to peel another apple.

And only core would be left anyway, even though that's what he thought, he moved his jaw up and down chewing the apple core with an unfocused expression.

Somehow, he felt as if he had a hole in his chest.

Did he really save Mari?

Even though he decided to shoulder half of her sins, he could not do it like this.

In the end, Mari was placed in the deepest prison. The evidence of false accusations gathered by Ouka lightened Mari's accusations, but not all of them were revoked.

It meant, Mari won't be free anymore.

He sighed feeling defeated, just as the melancholic feeling strengthened, someone knocked on his hospital room's door.

Even though he didn't respond, the door was loudly opened.

"Kusanagi, I'm entering."

"Didn't you already enter?

Ouka ignored his retort and immediately closed the door with a loud bang.

"What is it? Is there some urgent errand to do or something?"

It looked like that was the case as Ouka looked around the hospital room meekly.

"Haven't Saionji and Suginami come yet?"

"They were delayed a little, I asked them to buy me anpan and milk."

"...I see. How enviable."

Contrary to her words, she didn't seem envious at all.

Ouka came up next to Takeru's bed and sat on one of the stools.

"Well then, there's something I need to report to you."

Looking meek, she said to Takeru.

"...about Mari, was there any progress?"

Takeru leaned over and asked Ouka.

Ouka closed her eyes and crossed her arms, and made even more meek face.

"...well it's about that."

Seeing that reaction from Ouka, Takeru felt incredibly anxious.

No way, is she going to be left in state of suspended animation forever——

"Unfortunately..."

With half-closed eyes, Ouka muttered bitterly.

"What the hell is unfortunate...!"

A familiar-sounding voice.

The door of hospital room opened pushed with a forehead... and unexpectedly, Mari's face appeared.

"..........."

Takeru couldn't grasp the situation, and was in daze.

Ouka looked at Mari with half-closed eyes and clicked her tongue.

"For me, it's an unfortunate result."

"I was stupid to think even for a moment during the time in colosseum that you were okay... but you're just as annoying as ever!"

"Thanks to whom do you think you can be here?"

"Didn't you close the door as I tried to enter this room?! I hit the door with my forehead because of that! Look here! This bump!"

"Blame your own clumsiness. I tried to make Kusanagi happy with a surprise."

"You inflicted an injury on me with your surprise. Whatever!"

"I didn't organize it for you. I did it for Kusanagi's sake. I don't acknowledge you."

"Y...you...!!"

Mari blushed and tried to grab Ouka in anger.

Seeing the two people start fighting, Takeru was full of doubt.

"Mari... you... how...?"

Being asked, Mari blinked a few times and moved her gaze away from him embarrassed.

"...this one complained to Chairman, and somehow got me out."

"Got you out... the fact you're here... does it mean you've been released?"

Hearing Takeru ask that, Ouka snorted.

"It's conditional. As long as she takes part in experiments of Inquisition's anti-magic materials, help Seelie's in their experiments on magic injury healing drugs, she can live a normal life."

"Experiments... is that really alright?!"

"As long as she agrees to it, those guys will gladly cover the costs of Gleipnir. They really are sly bastards."

Just as Ouka said that, Mari looked towards Takeru with a bright expression.

"It's alright. People from Dullahan are always accompanying me during experiments, so they won't make me do any weird things. I don't feel too good about being a guinea pig, but I'm not in a position to nitpick. Above all else, I'm free. There's no reason not to do it right?"

She moved her hands behind her, near her waist, and added, "Also."

"...I wanted to meet you again."

She intended to say it casually, but her face turned red. Ouka who was next to her, stared at her.

"...she also has permission to attend school. The witch enrollment system will be formally adopted. But in the end, it looks like they won't be allowed to participate in platoon activities."

"I might not be allowed to participate, but I don't plan to play around."

"No one asked you to come over."

"I'm not saying that to you!"

"You're not our comrade, don't come over!"

"Wha-what did you say?!"

Takeru watched the two argue, and he unexpectedly looked down on his bed.

A joyful smile appeared on his face. At the same time, something hot flowed from his eyes.

"That's good... really... I'm happy..."

He felt as if salvation filled the hole within him, Takeru wiped his eyes with a finger.

"...you... you should get out after all! You made Kusanagi cry!"

"Takeru is probably crying because you hurt me——!"

"Why would you getting hurt make Kusanagi cry?"

"That's... look, it's because my bond with him are deeper than yours."

"W-wha... there's no way we who have fought together, have weaker bonds than a shriveled up witch like you!"

"Ah—— another discriminatory speech from you〜... who the hell is a shriveled up witch!"

"You're shriveled up, like your chest."

"It isn't shriveled up, it's just small!"

"It is small."

"It's not small!"

In the hospital room, there were some noisy individuals; seeing them Takeru smiled as he cried.

After a few minutes, Usagi and Ikaruga joined in while the two still argued with each other, and the situation became even more noisy.

He realized that it was the usual Small Fry Platoon.

But this time, Takeru was happy that it was just the usual between his comrades.

* * *

The same day, in the Chairman's office, Kurogane Hayato reported the information on Valhalla obtained from Nikaido Mari.

"...I wonder how authentic is it."

"I didn't get too much, but the analysis of the new Dragoon that rampaged... has confirmed it."

"I didn't want to think about it... but from the beginning there was no other possibility."

"Yes. Their technology was quite original. Banshee undercover were also hit, several people are missing."

Sougetsu had the report passed to him by Hayato in one hand, and looked outside the window at school after turning his chair.

"They were gray, close to black... but they're moving so blatantly now. I wonder if they went mad. I wanted to remain allies if possible but... we would have to compromise too much now."

Sougetsu squinted unusually.

"Alchemist Corporation——the alchemists, they went too far."

"Let's take them up on it."

"...that's right."

After throwing the report at the desk, Sougetsu smiled and rested his cheek on his hand.

"——For the time being, call Suginami-kun. I want to tell her about her home."

Saying Ikaruga's name, Sougetsu laughed ominously.

Afterwords

Hello, it's been a while, It's Yanagimi Touki here.

Well then, the second volume, Witch's Struggle.

To sum it up easily, a story about overburdened natural lady-killer siscon and a pervert whose sexual preference covers about every fetish, compete for a witch whose tits can't be even called "small", as she's simply flat like a chopping board.

Eh? I'm messing around too much? Isn't it all correct...

...oh well, this time it's centred around Mari whom you've caught a glimpse of in first volume.

Now, this time it's flat chest's turn now. A flat chest phase. No, it's not like I made her like that to balance out the disproportionate amount of big boobs.

It's a super development where a witch enters the Small Fry Platoon, the irregular platoon enters the tournament, Mari and Ouka's become the pair with the worst affinity, and the witch hunter clashes with the sorcerer...

These are the biggest attractions this time.

A choice, the girl who had none, Mari. The girl who did make a choice yet was taken from, Ouka. And the boy who did not make one, Takeru.

In Takeru's case, he just wants to keep living.

Also the villain, Haunted. Even though I've made him, he's a really disgusting guy. He would puff out his chest with pride and yell "We should go down the path of evil!", and do his best.

Now then, the thanks.

The one whom I always inconvenience, S-San who's in charge of me, and Kippu who drew high quality illustrations despite his busy schedule.

Also everyone who picked up and read this book, thank you.

Also for continued support, thanks in advance.

I pray so that I can see you again.

Yanagimi Touki.

まだまだ
ラピスちゃんが
気になる
お年頃
です。
お兄ちゃん
切符